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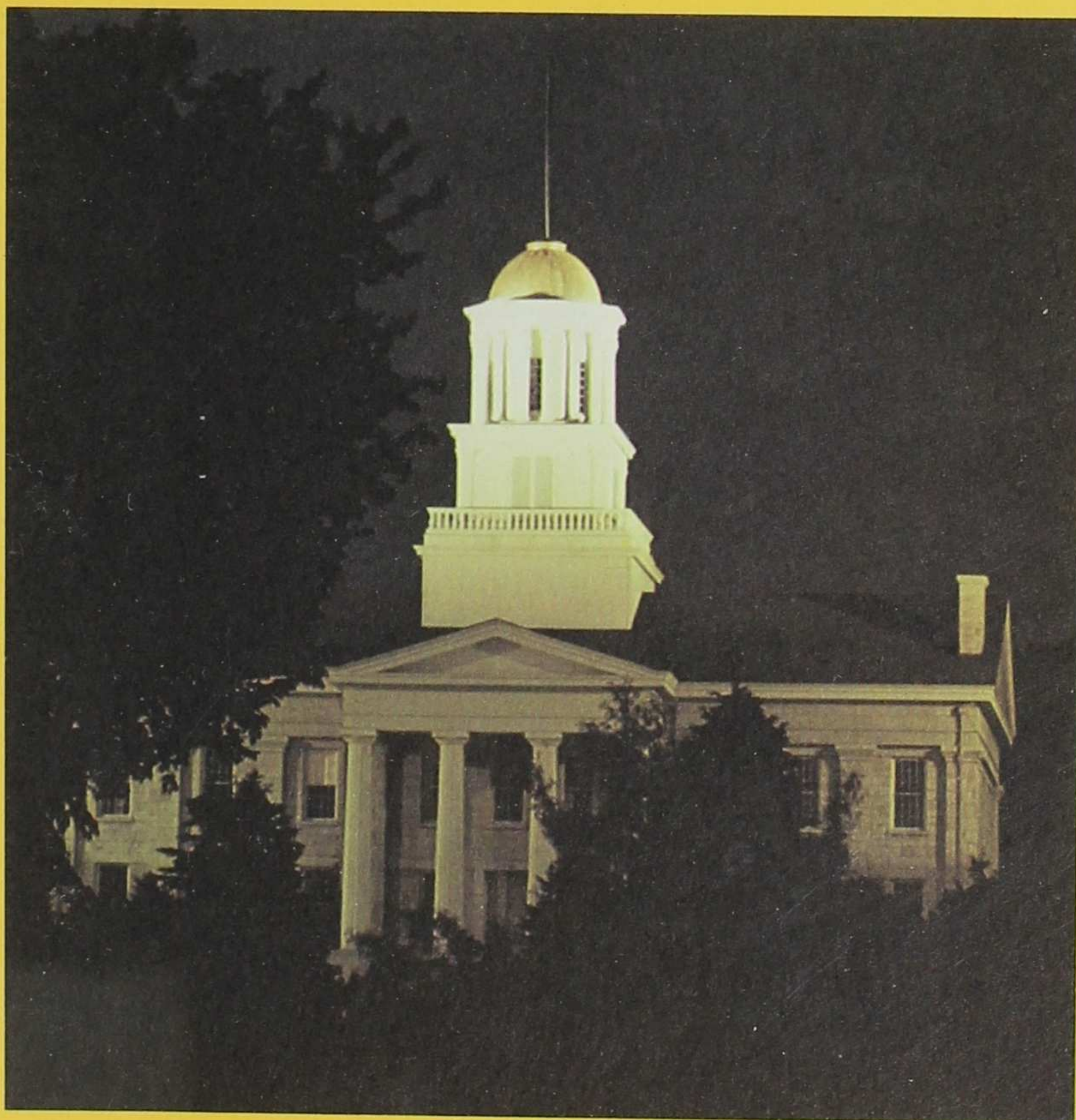
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The Palimpsest

VOLUME 57 NUMBER 4

JULY/AUGUST 1976



Iowa's Old Capitol

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DIVISION OF THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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L. Edward Purcell, Editor

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Cover: Old Stone Capitol reflects in its flood-lights the glory of frontier Iowa. (photo by Robert A. Ryan)



The Meaning of the Palimpsest

In early times a palimpsest was a parchment or other material from which one or more writings had been erased to give room for later records. But the erasures were not always complete, and so it became the fascinating task of scholars not only to translate the later records but also to reconstruct the original writings by deciphering the dim fragments of letters partly erased and partly covered by subsequent texts.

The history of Iowa may be likened to a palimpsest which holds the record of successive generations. To decipher these records of the past, reconstruct them, and tell the stories which they contain is the task of those who write history.

FRONTIER STONE:

The Story of Iowa's Old Capitol

by Robert K. Bower

On July 4, 1839, a very special birthday party was held on the future site of the Stone Capitol overlooking the Iowa River. Iowa City was but a plan on a piece of paper (the only evidence of white settlement in the area was a few log cabins and clearings for future dwellings), yet more than 100 persons came from miles around to take part in the celebration. They came to mark the first anniversary of the birth of the Territory of Iowa and the sixty-third birthday of the United States. But they were also celebrating the impending birth of a building that would stand as a silent witness to the growth of a city and a state named Iowa.

Events that led to this Fourth of July celebration on such an unlikely spot, only recently cleared of the wilderness hazel brush and some of the trees, began in June 1838 when Congress passed the "organic law," creating the Territory of Iowa. This law empowered the Governor and the Legislative Assembly "to establish the seat of Government for said Territory, at such place as they may deem eligible," and the act appropriated twenty thousand dollars to be applied to the construction of public buildings at the seat of government.

In the autumn, the First Legislative Assembly of the Territory of Iowa convened at Burlington, and in his first

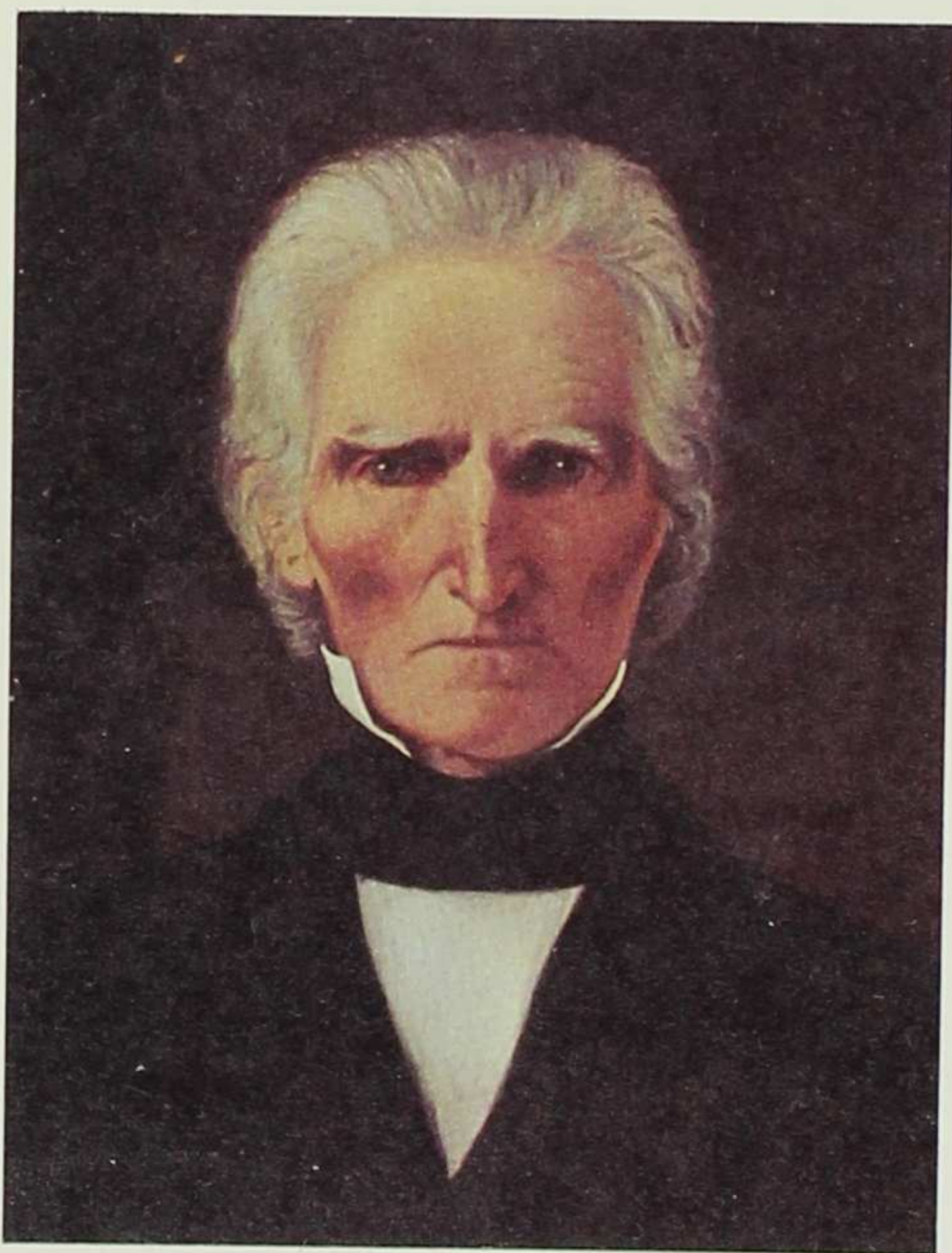
message Governor Robert Lucas outlined its duties and responsibilities under the organic law. Lucas told the Assembly that the fairest way to carry out the provisions of the organic law regarding the selection of a seat of government was "to provide by law for the appointment of three disinterested men, of known integrity and weight of character, and to vest them with authority to take the subject into consideration, and to fix upon a place for the seat of Government of the Territory. . . ."

Lucas knew that the subject had "excited to a considerable degree, conflicting interests and local feelings, in various parts of the Territory." He urged the Assembly to exclude from their deliberations "every interest of a local or private character."

Lucas's call for disinterestedness was mostly political rhetoric. The legislators understood that distinction and prosperity would come to the new seat of government, and much political wrangling marked the debates over the question. Finally, the legislators reached agreement on a compromise suggested by Colonel Thomas Cox: to locate the capital "at the most eligible place" on unoccupied government land in Johnson County.

The bill was sent to Governor Lucas on January 4, 1839. He studied it and re-





Governor Robert Lucas, oil portrait by George Yewell.

turned it to the Legislative Assembly with suggestions for improvement, including a provision for the sale of lots on the site to help finance the building of the capitol. The legislators worked out a supplementary bill containing the Governor's suggestions, and it was this bill that (on the motion of Colonel Cox) contained the name of the proposed capital; it was to be called "Iowa City."

The Governor was uneasy about locating the capital on unsurveyed government land without consent of the Federal Government, so the supplementary bill contained a provision that authorized the Governor to apply to Congress for a donation of four sections of land on which to locate the seat of government. Governor Lucas also questioned if it was legal for the Legislative Assembly to name their

own members to the board of commissioners that would locate the site for the capitol and superintend its construction. The Legislative Assembly had met in a joint session in the House on January 18, 1839, to appoint the board of commissioners. The Assembly elected Chauncey Swan, a member of the House; Robert Ralston, a member of the Council; and John Ronalds, who was not a member of the Assembly. Despite his objections, Governor Lucas signed the two bills into law on January 21, 1839.

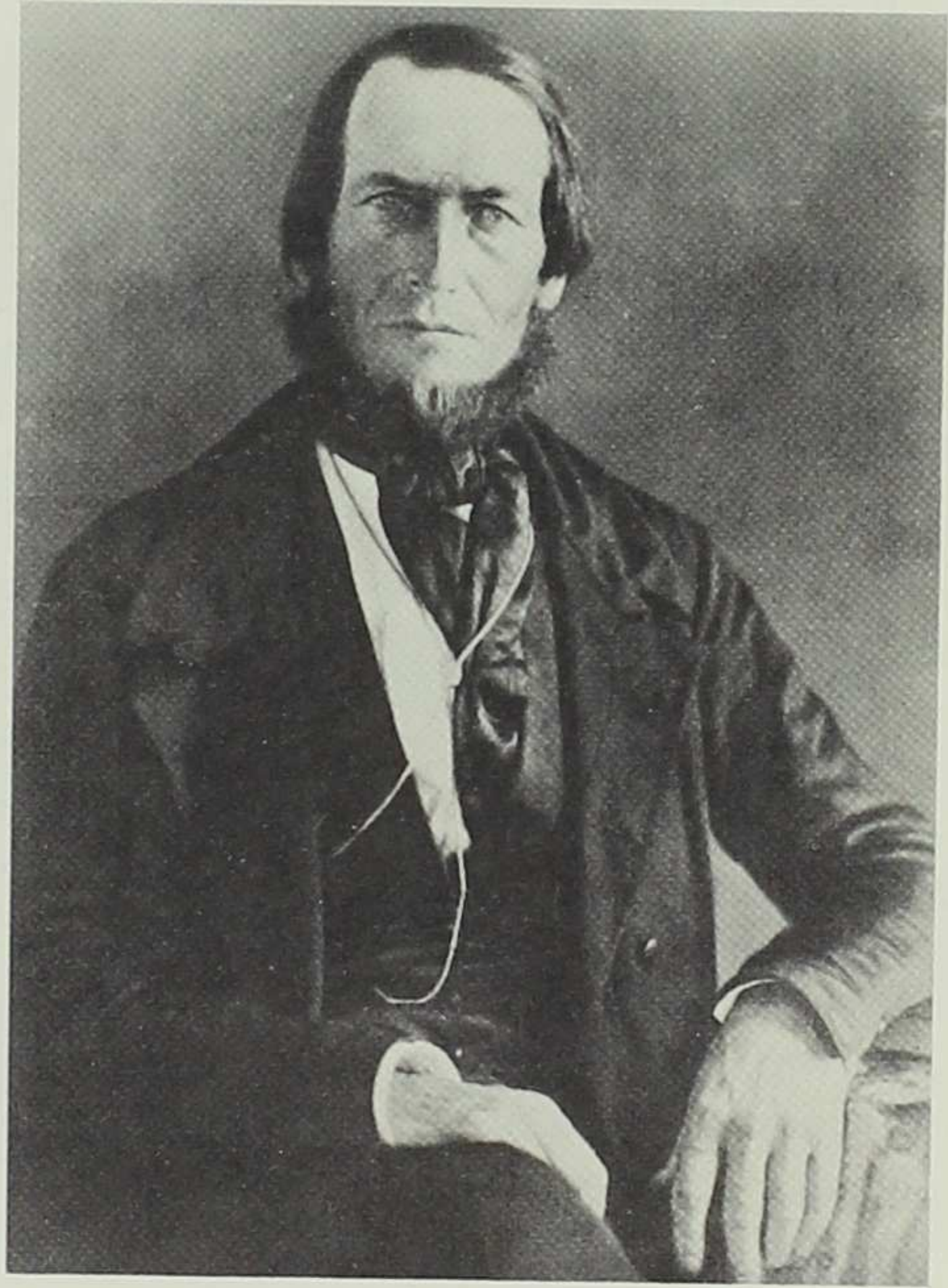
The following March, Congress sanctioned the selection of a site for the capital of Iowa Territory by granting "one entire section of land, of any of the surveyed public lands in said Territory, for the purpose of erecting thereon the public buildings for the use of the Executive and Legislative departments of the Government of the said Territory." The act also authorized the Territory to sell the remaining lots in the section to help finance the erection of the public buildings.

The next step was the actual selection of the site of the new seat of government to be located "at the most eligible point within the present limits of Johnson County..." To carry out their responsibilities, the commissioners, "or a majority of them," were to meet at Napoleon on the first day of May 1839.

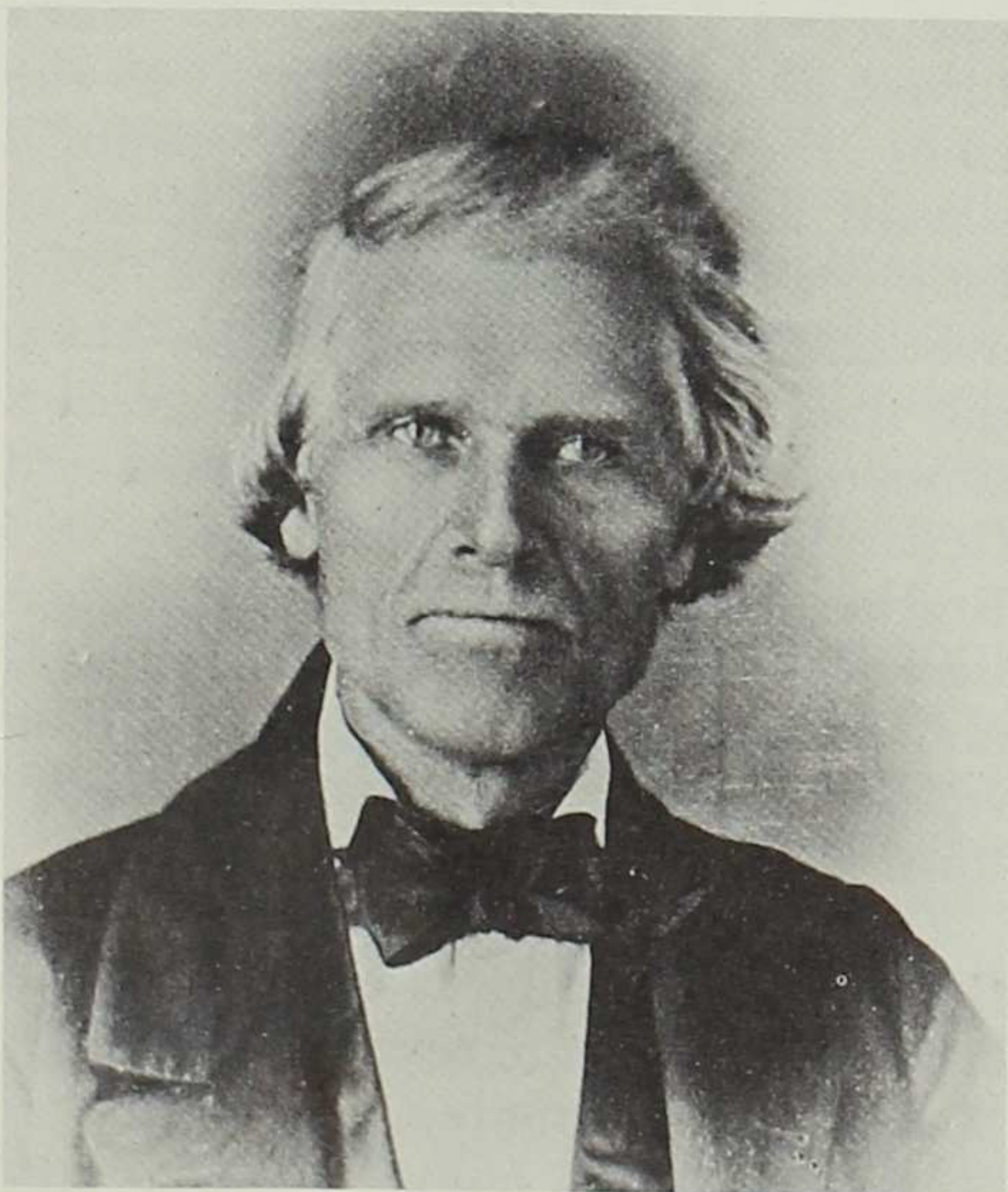
Chauncey Swan was the first commissioner to arrive in Napoleon on the morning of May 1. The village, 20 miles from the edge of Indian lands, consisted of little more than John Gilbert's trading post. Even so, a group of curious onlookers was on hand to witness the day's events. As the morning wore on,

there was no sign of either of the other commissioners. Residents of the area became more and more uneasy. Was there some confusion concerning the time and place of meeting? Or was there even some deliberate attempt to delay the commissioners so that Johnson County would not be able to claim the coveted capital site?

At about noon, Chauncey Swan stepped onto a drygoods box and made a brief speech. He explained that at least two of the commissioners were required by law to meet in Napoleon on May 1 for the purpose of selecting a site for the capital of the Territory. Robert Ralston of Des Moines County was more than a half day's ride from Napoleon, but Swan said there was a chance John Ronalds could be reached in time. So Swan asked for a volunteer to attempt to ride the 35 miles to Ronalds' home and bring him back in



Chauncey Swan



John Ronalds

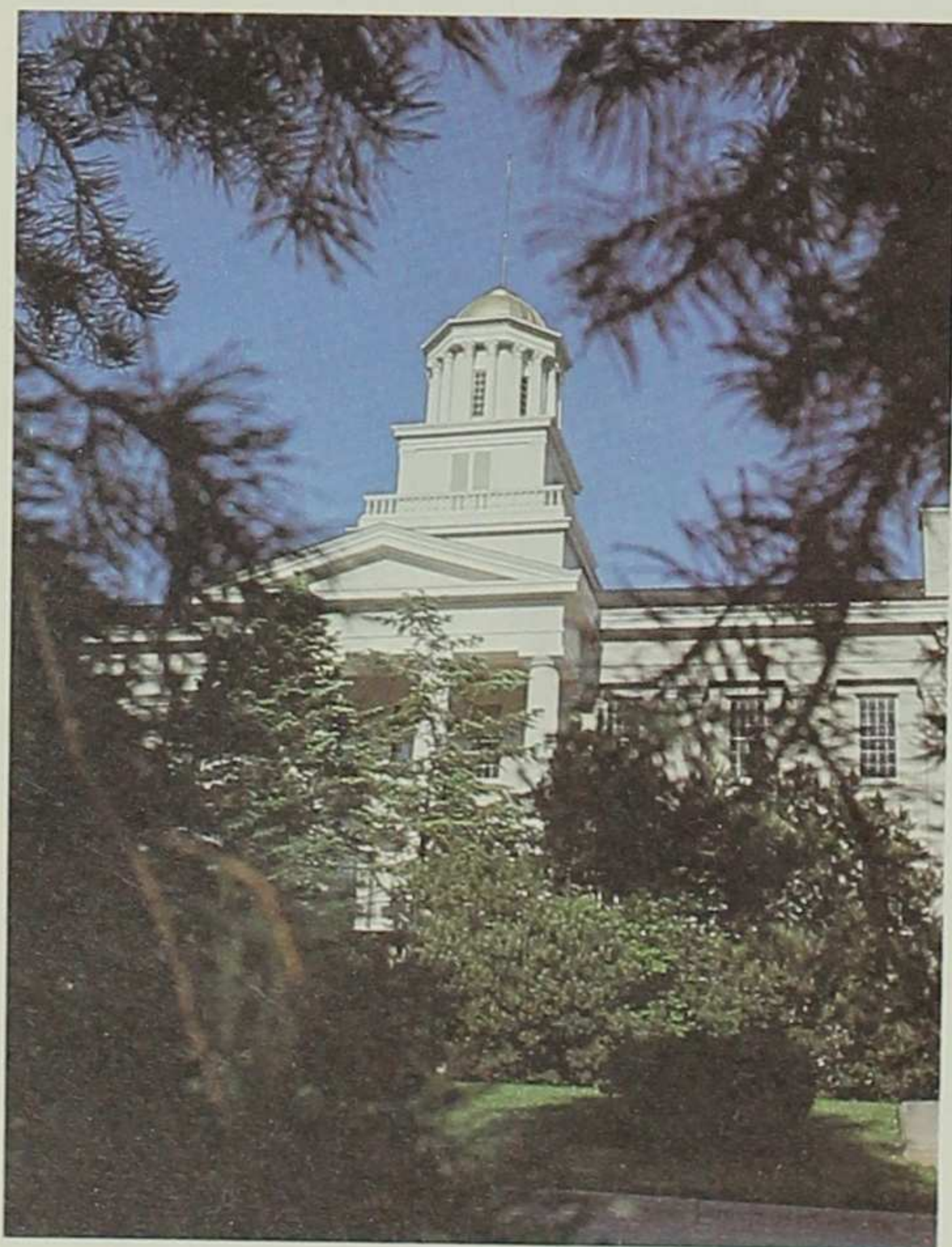
time to take the commissioners' oath that day.

Philip Clark, one of the first settlers of the area, stepped forward and offered to attempt the difficult task. The crowd cheered as he rode off, but they were fearful that Clark would not be able to make the 70-mile ride (including ferrying the Cedar River both ways) in the remaining 12 hours of the day. Henry Felkner, who was there, told the story:

... as it began to draw on toward midnight and no tidings, their fears began to give way to despair. Swan often consulted his watch and then would send some one out to listen, but no sound could be heard; this was repeated frequently until at last the sound of horses' hoofs were heard in the distance approaching rapidly. They did not slack up till they arrived

at the place of meeting, and when the riders dismounted and went in, Swan again consulted his watch and found it was just five minutes to twelve o'clock. Clark had saved the seat of Government to Johnson county. All honor to Philip Clark, and three cheers!

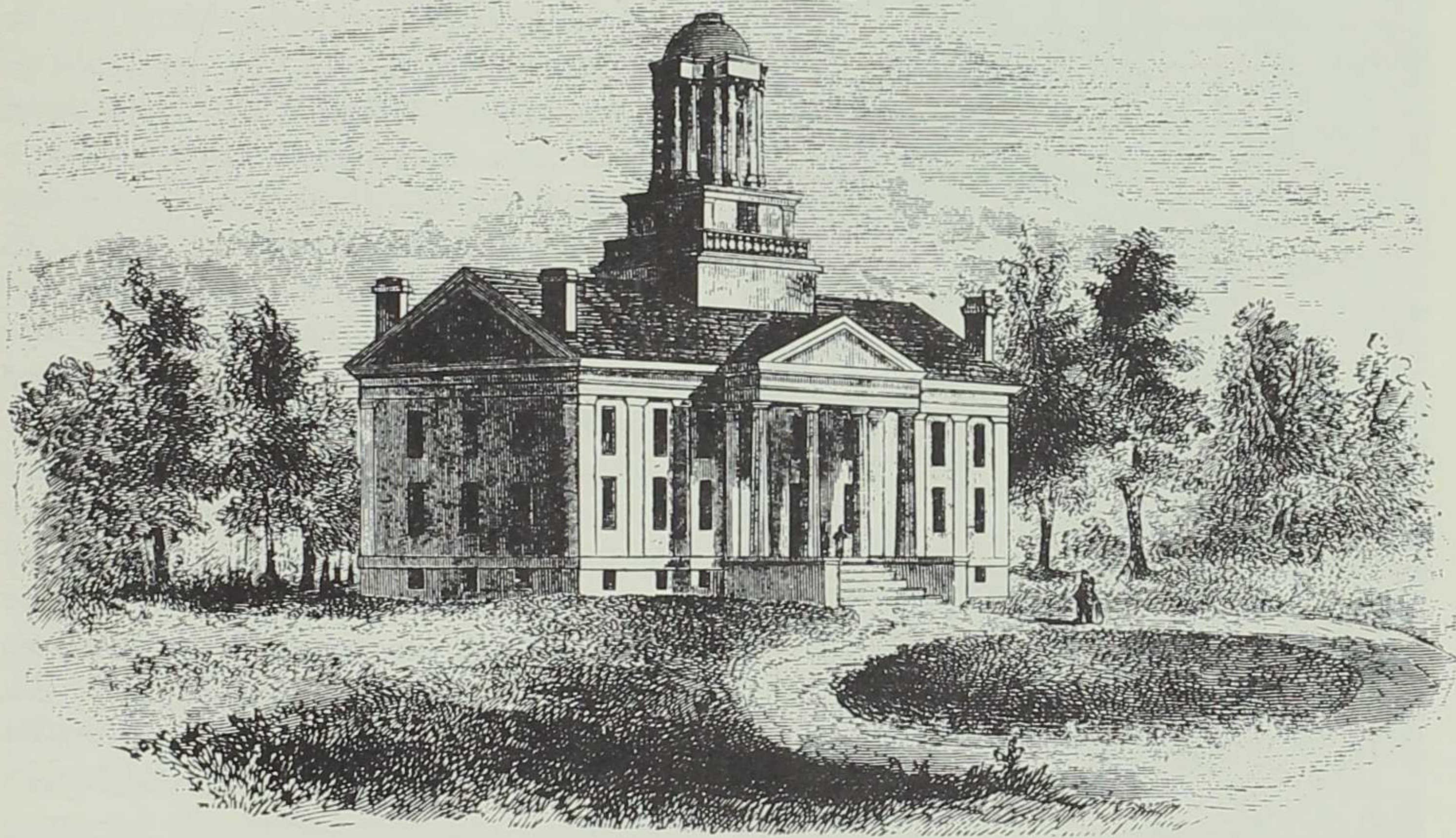
A Justice of the Peace, Robert Walker, was on hand to administer the oath of office to the commissioners. After Swan and Ronalds were duly sworn into office and the date of *May 1, 1839* affixed to the document, the commissioners immediately adjourned the meeting and agreed to meet the next day. They were confident they had carried out their legal obligations for the day of May 1, but there were rumors that the law had been stretched. Henry Felkner observed "that from the time of meeting until sun up were the shortest six hours on record to that date."



(Robert A. Ryan photo)

On May 2, Swan and Ronalds met again and, after appointing John Frierson as clerk to the board, began their search for the site of the new Territorial capital. About two miles north of Napoleon they paused. They were standing on a high piece of ground on the east side of the Iowa River. Between where they stood and the edge of the river, the slope was broken by two level stretches of land, forming a natural amphitheater. The river made its way from the northwest between rocky banks of moderate height with thick groves of trees, then turned south past the site, and flowed off in the distance between uneven banks dotted with oak trees. As the commissioners faced "center stage" from their uppermost seats of the amphitheater, they saw bluffs rising 40 or 50 feet on the west side of the river to a prairie "sweeping westward in beautiful and ocean like undulations a distance of five miles to Oldman's Creek." They turned around to glimpse between the trees the ground sloping slightly toward a creek, then rising again to form oak and hickory-covered hills overlooking the capitol site. They knew the spot to be on the lower edge of a timbered area between the Iowa and Cedar Rivers known as "Big Grove." Further explorations during the next two days revealed the area was well drained and a good quantity of building stone existed in the banks of the nearby Iowa. This was the place.

There was only one minor problem in designating the site as the Territorial capital. The Congressional Act of March 3, 1839, granted one section of "surveyed public lands" for the Territorial capital. But since only two



An 1855 lithographic view.

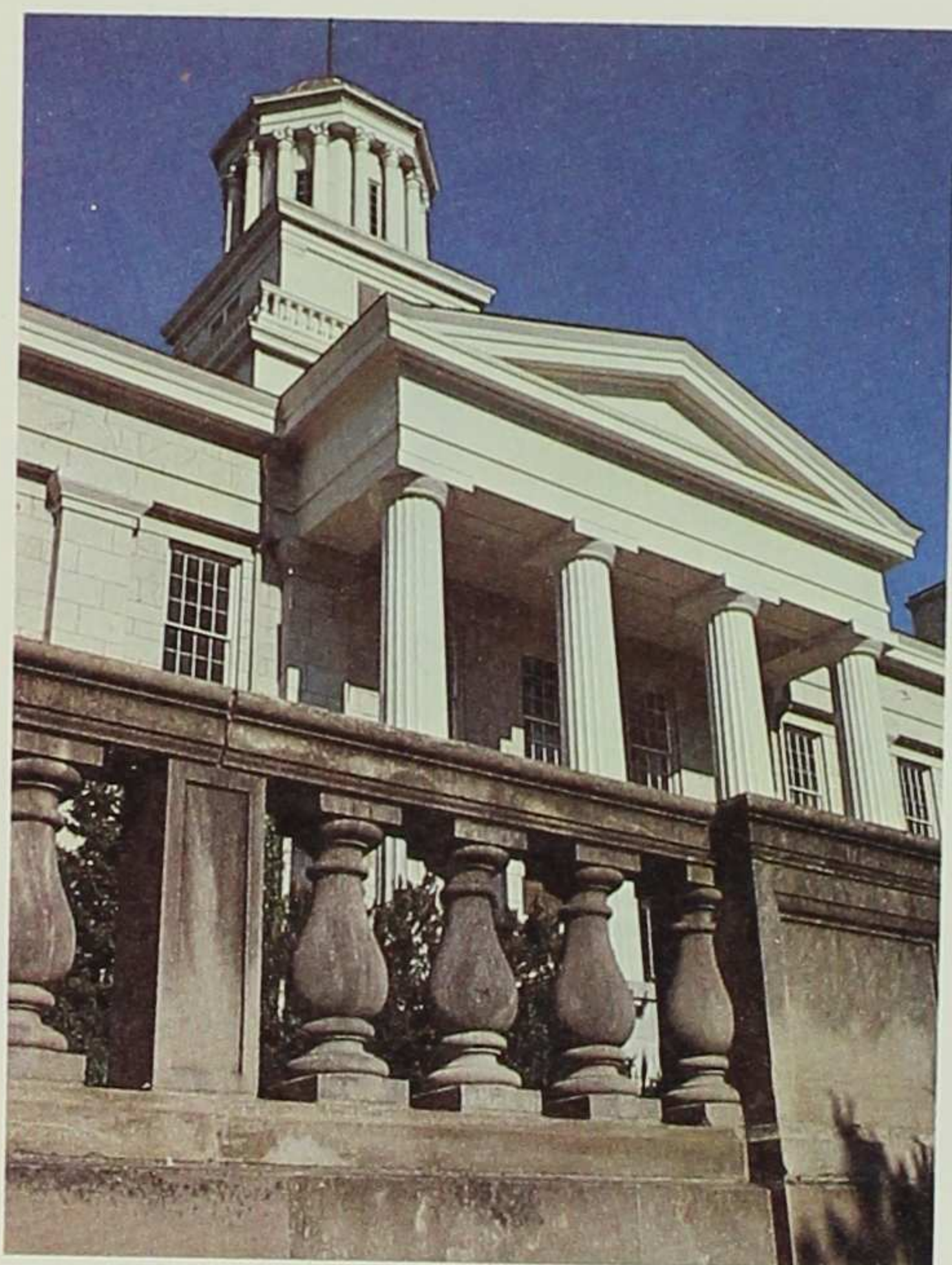
townships in Johnson County had been surveyed, there was not much choice for a legal site. However, one of the commissioners had discussed the problem with the Surveyor General and learned that an order might be obtained for a special survey of any township in which the location might be made. So the commissioners felt free to pick "the most eligible point" in Johnson County.

The commissioners spent the morning of the third day of May examining the "marble" quarry. The stone proved to be a tannish-gray limestone suitable for building. The same day, John Frierson conducted an unofficial survey and determined the exact location of the site.

On Saturday, May 4, 1839, Swan and Ronalds officially located the new seat

of government on Section 10 of Township 79 North of Range 6 West of the 5th Principal Meridian. In their report to the Governor, the commissioners said: "for the purpose of designating the spot on which the public buildings are to be erected the undersigned planted a hickory post in the ground, six links west of a black oak tree two feet in diameter, upon which the name of Iowa City is written with a pencil; twelve chains East of the Iowa river."

Before long, a more permanent post appeared to mark the site. It was a smoothly-hewn oak post inscribed with two-inch high letters cut with a surveyor's marking tool (supposedly by Leander Judson, who was to draw the first map of Iowa City). The inscription read: "Seat of Government, City of Iowa, May 4th, 1839. C. Swan, John



The west face of Old Capitol, framed by the steps of a decorative terrace added in the 1920s. (Robert A. Ryan photo)

Ronalds, Rob't. Ralston, commissioners. Geo. Kelley, J. H. McKenny, of Des Moines, J. W. Isett of Louisa, L. D. Dillon of Dubuque, witness Sec. 10, T. 79, R. 6 W. 5th Mer." Legend has it that this post later was stored in a vault in the basement of Old Capitol, until the clerk of the United States District Court one day used it for firewood.

Robert Ralston, the third commissioner, had not yet taken part in the location of the seat of government. He arrived on Monday, May 6, was duly sworn in, and gave his approval to the actions of the other two commissioners. The next day the commissioners agreed on Chauncey Swan to be Acting Commissioner and disbanded, having completed their initial task.

Chauncey Swan wasted no time.

After locating the site, the commissioners prepared a memorial to the President of the United States requesting a special survey of the Territorial capital site. Swan sent copies of the memorial to Governor Lucas and the General Land Office in Washington. In the meantime, Swan met with Ronalds at his home in Louisa County, where they "ordered that Thomas Cox and John Frierson be employed to survey the town [of Iowa City] and L. Judson to draw the necessary plats." Frierson was later commissioned U.S. Deputy Surveyor to survey Scott and Iowa City (now Lucas) townships in Johnson County, which he also finished in July, finally legitimizing the site as the seat of government of the Territory of Iowa.

The work of surveying and laying out the town site was halted for the special first Fourth of July celebration in Iowa City. Even though this was still the frontier, the Fourth was celebrated "in the most approved 'down east' fashion," according to an account in a county history. Cyrus Sanders, an early Johnson County settler who took part in that first Fourth of July celebration, recalled that the stars and stripes were unfurled and attached to the top of a tall young oak tree stripped of its branches.

People from miles around brought baskets of provisions for the picnic, but the "fresh cooked" part of the meal was prepared at the tavern in Gilbert's Trading Post and hauled to the capitol site in wagons. Wagon boxes were lifted off their axles and overturned to serve as picnic tables. After dinner the usual patriotic toasts were offered. Then a wagon was pulled into a shady spot and

a board laid across the box to form a sort of rustic rostrum for the speakers. Sanders claimed the orator placed one foot on a barrel of Cincinnati whiskey in the wagon, but the writer of the county history took pains to point out that though the story may be very funny, "*it isn't true.*"

Colonel Thomas Cox, who less than six months before had named the city that was just beginning to spring up about them, was chosen to preside over the festivities. The reading of the Declaration of Independence by Luke Douglass was followed by the main oration by John Frierson. Though Sanders described Frierson as possessing "abilities much superior to the average Fourth of July orator," his physical appearance was somewhat less noble, according to Sanders: "His complexion was sandy, he was tall, spare, raw boned, hard featured, stoop shouldered, knock-kneed and pigeon toed."

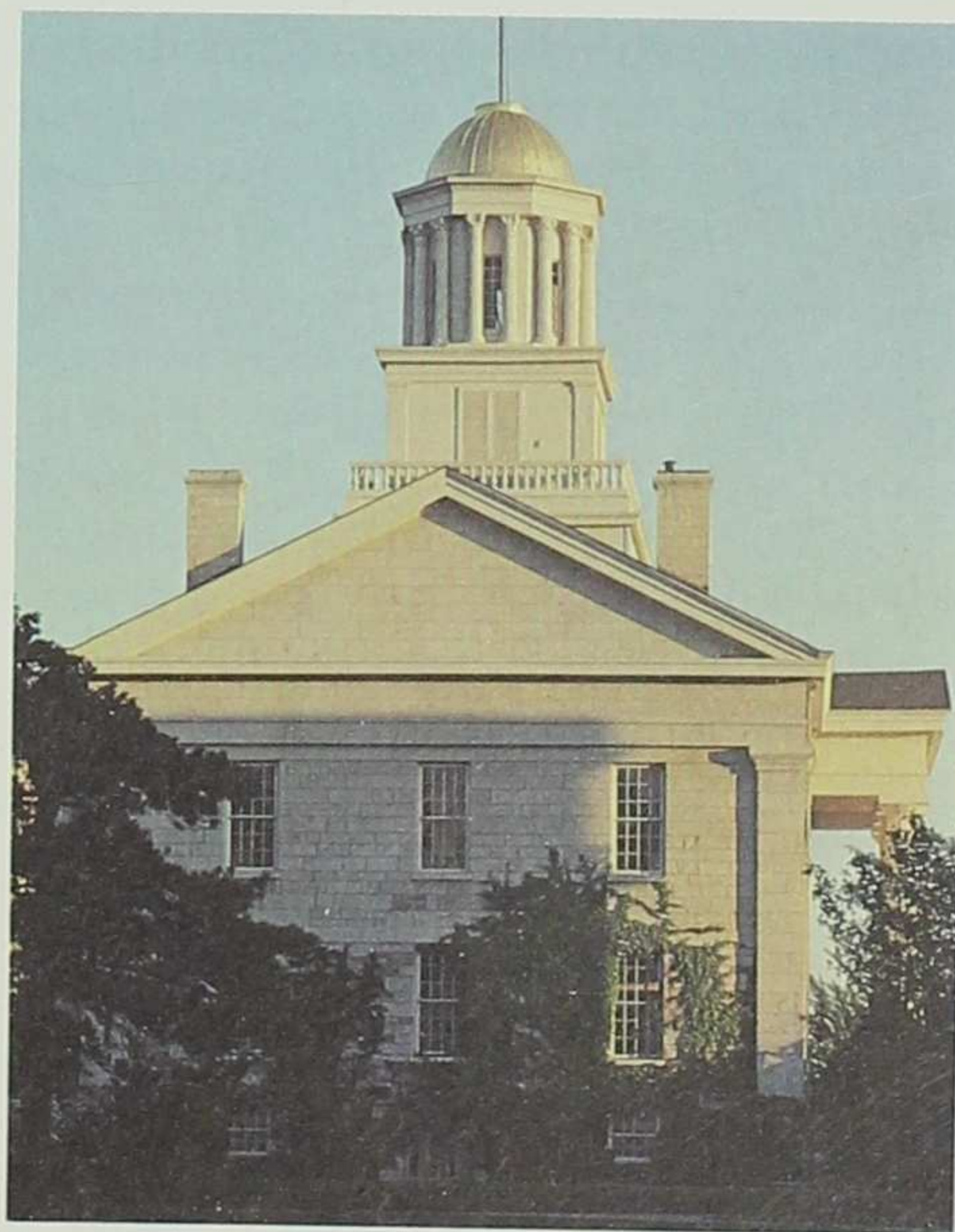
Cyrus Sanders did not write in his diary that night; perhaps he was too busy celebrating. He became ill the next day, after cutting saw logs. By July 8 he was feeling better, so he walked down to the capitol site and pulled out his pocket diary to catch up the entries. As he recalled the events of the Fourth, he felt deeply the significance of the spot where he stood. In this moment of private reflection, he jotted down these words:

How pleasant to stand and in imagination take a peep into futurity. Here where I am standing in a little while will the Capitol of a mighty state rear its sculptured columns; whose walls will reverberate with the eloquence of some future Henry which will hold entranced his admiring thousands. Yes here! where there is nothing now to be seen but the

towering oak and beautiful undulating Prairie will perhaps in some future day rise a majestic City—

After the Fourth, the surveying of the town went ahead, but not without difficulty. The heavy morning dew on the luxuriant vegetation prevented early starts, and the afternoon heat was stifling. The surveyors used Leander Judson's map as a guide for laying out the city. Finally the work was finished, and Judson's map was officially registered with the recorder of Johnson County on July 13.

This opened the way for the sale of lots the following August and October. According to Chauncey Swan's report to the Legislative Assembly, there were 181 lots officially sold for the sum of \$26,739.75. Of this, Swan had received \$7,105 in cash, the rest in notes.



*The south face, seen in soft evening light.
(Robert A. Ryan photo)*

Swan was busy also with the beginning phases of construction of the Capitol. Of course, the first step was to hire an architect or architects for the building. It is plainly recorded in the journals of the Second Legislative Assembly that John F. Rague, who had designed the Illinois Capitol in Springfield, was the architect of the Iowa Capitol. But how complete his plans were and how faithfully they were followed are questions that may never be answered, for the plans themselves cannot be found.

To complicate matters, legend persists that Father Samuel Charles Mazzuchelli was the designer of the building. Father Mazzuchelli was an extraordinary person, serving as missionary to the Indians and rough traders of the upper Mississippi during the 1830s. He ranged over a large part of eastern Iowa and southern Wisconsin, and he founded many schools and

churches in settlements of the area. Besides being a priest and a scholar, Mazzuchelli was an excellent architect. He designed and built churches in Dubuque, Galena, Davenport, and Iowa City, to name just a few.

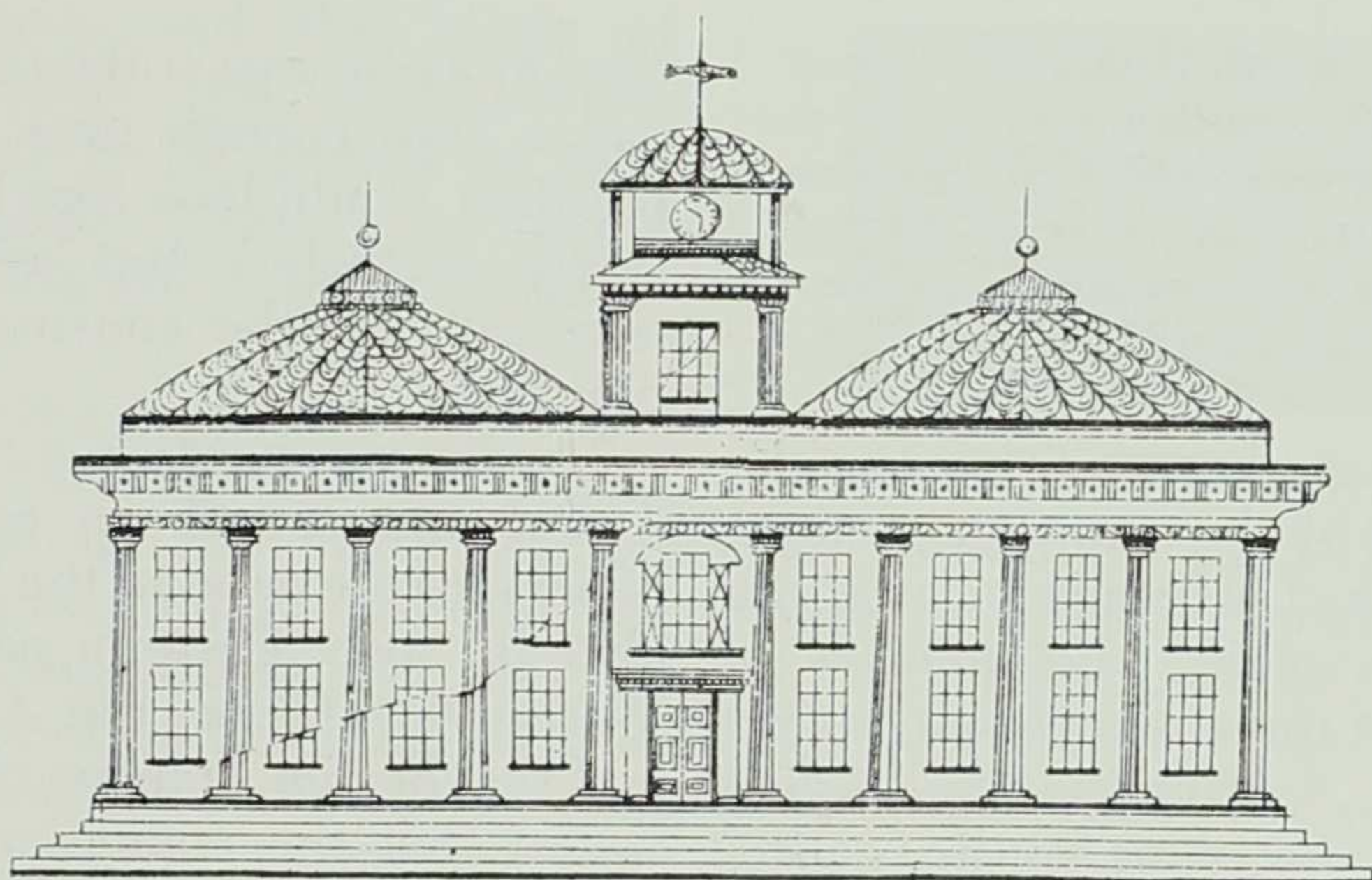
The legend that Mazzuchelli designed Old Capitol probably first appeared in print a few weeks after his death in the spring of 1864 when Catholic newspapers carried a long obituary. Included in the account of Mazzuchelli's life was the following sentence: "The first Legislature of Iowa engaged him to draw a plan for their new capital, which cost \$120,000." Oddly, the first newspaper known to have carried the obituary was a California paper, the *San Francisco Monitor*.

Since 1864, the legend has been stated as fact in several sources. As recently as 1967 the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* published by McGraw-Hill stated that Mazzuchelli "was responsible in part for the planning and design of the old state capitol in Iowa City, Iowa."

Some Iowa historians also have perpetuated the legend. In 1888, Henry W. Lathrop wrote in the *Iowa Historical Record*: "The plan of the building, as originally drawn by Father Mazzuchelli, had no porticos and it had two domes on the roof, one on each side of the cupola, these domes were afterwards omitted and the porticos added." Lathrop's description undoubtedly refers to the drawing of the "Capitol of Iowa Ter." that appeared in the upper lefthand corner of the printed version of Judson's first map of Iowa City. Was this indeed drawn from Mazzuchelli's plans perhaps already in the hands of Chauncey Swan by July of 1839? Probably not, for the drawing did



Samuel Charles Mazzuchelli



The St. Louis lithographer who printed Judson's original map of Iowa City added this double-domed drawing to the map, labeling it "Capitol of Iowa Ter." More likely it was simply an ornament and not intended to depict the plan for the building.

not appear on Judson's original version of the map; it was apparently added by the lithographer of St. Louis who prepared the map for printing. Did Lathrop have some convincing reason for linking Mazzuchelli with the drawing on the Judson map, or was he stretching the evidence because of the already blossoming Mazzuchelli legend? There is no clear-cut answer.

Similarly, H. G. Plum wrote in the January 1896 issue of the *Iowa Historical Record*:

The original plan of the building was designed by Father Mazzuchelli, a Catholic priest, of Dubuque. According to this plan, a copy of which may be seen in the rooms of the Iowa State Historical Society, two cupolas were to surmount the roof instead of one; and the porticos were to extend along the entire front of the building. John F. Rague & Co. obtained the contract to construct the building, and the plans were somewhat altered.

The original plan to which Plum refers has not since turned up in the archives

of the State Historical Society, nor has any other writer mentioned it. Plum may also have been referring to the drawing on Judson's map.

Mazzuchelli's own *Memoirs*, published in 1844, give no clues to the identity of the designer of Old Capitol. In one passage, Mazzuchelli describes the building, even giving its dimensions. But he says no more than any other close observer might say upon viewing the building. In fact, he says less about the structure than one would expect from an architect.

In the records of the Territorial Assembly, there is no evidence specifically associating Father Mazzuchelli with the building of Old Capitol. But there are many references to John F. Rague. In his report to the House dated December 6, 1839, Chauncey Swan wrote:

A draft of the plan for the erection of the public buildings, is in the hands of the Architect, Mr. Rague, of Springfield, Illinois.

As he is the contractor for the erection

of the capitol, it was thought necessary by the board of commissioners, as well as by himself, that he should retain the plan which was adopted by the board, to enable him to draw a bill of items, and form his models in accordance with the specifications.

Swan may have been referring to the plan drawn up by the commissioners on the day they had officially located the site of the capitol. The *Journal of Proceedings* of the commissioners stated that on May 4, 1839 they "consumed the day in drawing plans for the Capitol and placing a stake in the center of the proposed site." Swan had probably consulted with architects or builders (perhaps even Mazzuchelli, who was in

the Dubuque area at the time), since he had a firm enough idea of what the building would look like to draw up a fairly detailed list of materials necessary for the construction of the building.

The list was published between May 4 and October 26 in several newspapers, mostly around the Territory but also in such Eastern papers as the *Washington Globe*, the *Albany Argus*, and the *Boston Statesman*. The notice stated that the commissioners would receive sealed bids for furnishing materials for the building. The notice gave the specific dimensions of the building, the number and height of



Iowa artist Mildred Pelzer completed this oil painting of the construction of Old Capitol in 1934. Father Samuel Mazzuchelli is the focal point of the painting, even though Pelzer probably knew of the controversy surrounding the identity of the building's designer. It is a fine example of New Deal painting, making up in artistic value what it lacks in historical accuracy. For many years, it and several other Pelzer paintings hung in the lobby of an Iowa City hotel. The murals were nearly destroyed when the hotel was remodeled in the 1960s, but two local businessmen salvaged and restored several of the paintings. (courtesy of Richard T. Feddersen and Old Capitol Motors, Iowa City)

stone columns, and the kinds of materials needed for construction. Proposals were to be opened on November 4, 1839, "and the lowest responsible bids will, in all cases, be received."

The following paragraph from the notice is the most interesting: "A plan of the building and bills of the materials may be seen by application to either of the subscribers; but they reserve to themselves the right to alter any part thereof previous to the conclusion of the contract." This, together with the quotation above from the *House Journal*, indicates that Rague was given preliminary plans for the erection of the building.

A hint concerning these plans given to Rague is found in notes on debate in the House appearing in the *Burlington Hawk-Eye* on January 9, 1840. Shepherd Leffler, a representative from Des Moines County, criticized the actions of the commissioners regarding the erection of the capitol:

By the law [the commissioners] were to adopt a plan, and then issue proposals for six months. As late as October no plan had been agreed upon, and the lettings had to be made the 4th of November. It was ascertained that the acting commissioner had authorized a person in Du Buque to draught a plan—but when it was submitted to Mr. Rague, it was pointed out to be defective and was thrown aside, and without affording an opportunity for competition, the acting commissioner actually made an arrangement with Mr. Rague for a plan of the building, and employed him as architect of the same.

The mention of "a person in Du Buque" may lend some weight to the argument that Mazzuchelli was involved in the early planning stages, but



by itself it is little more than enticing.

On November 12, 1839, Rague entered into a contract in which he agreed "to erect the capitol to the top of the horizontal cornice, Porticos, columns, entablatures, &c. in two years from that date, according to the original plans, for \$46,400, the Commissioner furnishing the materials." Soon after Rague entered into the contract, the editor of the *Illinois Springfield Journal* ran a story about it. The editor claimed to have seen "a part of the plan of the building" and went on to describe in some detail the floor containing the legislative chambers. Whether the plan mentioned was one recently drawn up by Rague or one given him by the commissioners is not clear in the newspaper article. It seems probable that the plan was Rague's, however, for on December 20, 1839, Rague appeared before the legislative Council in Burlington "to exhibit his plans for the Public buildings. . . ."

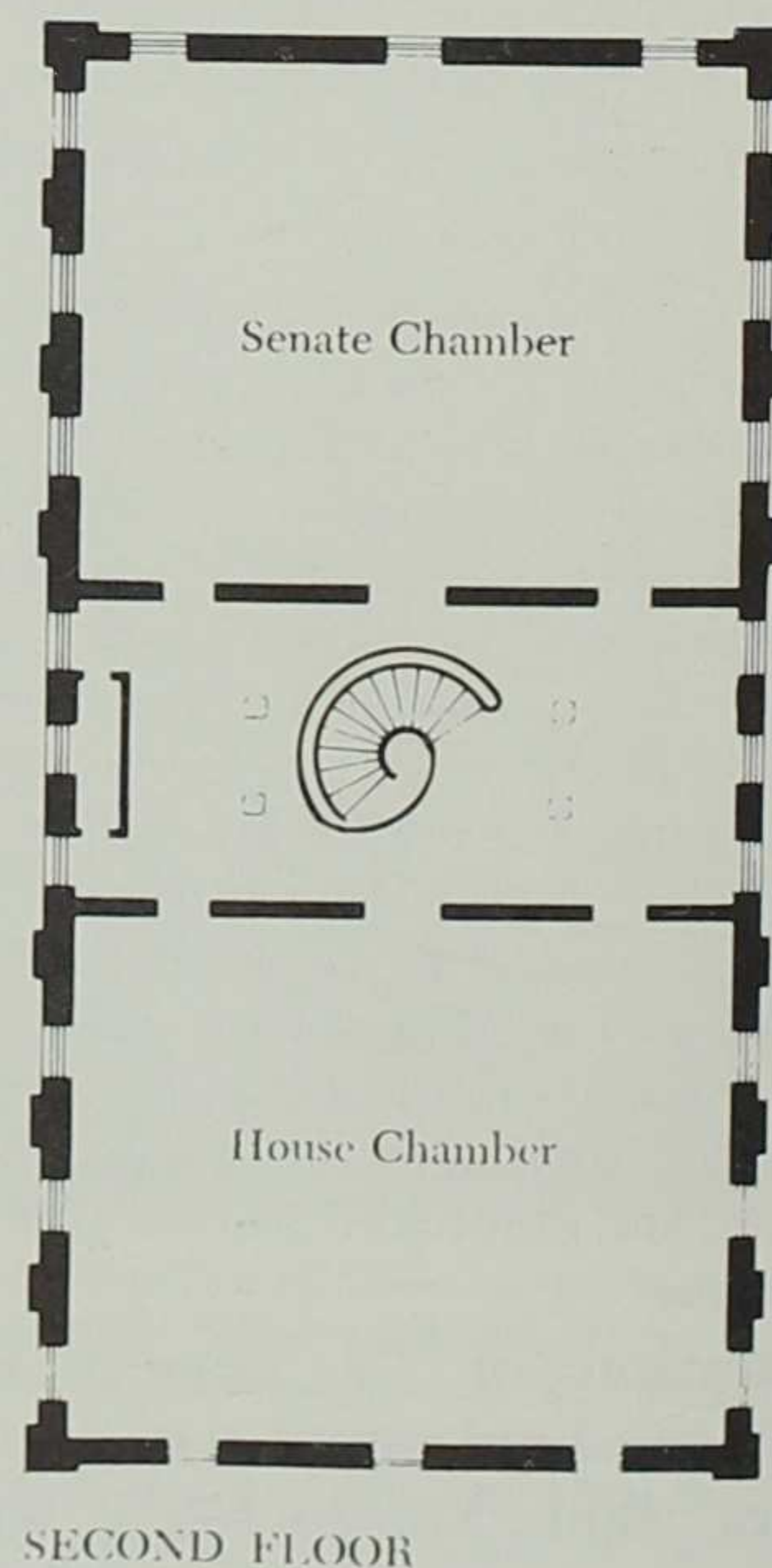
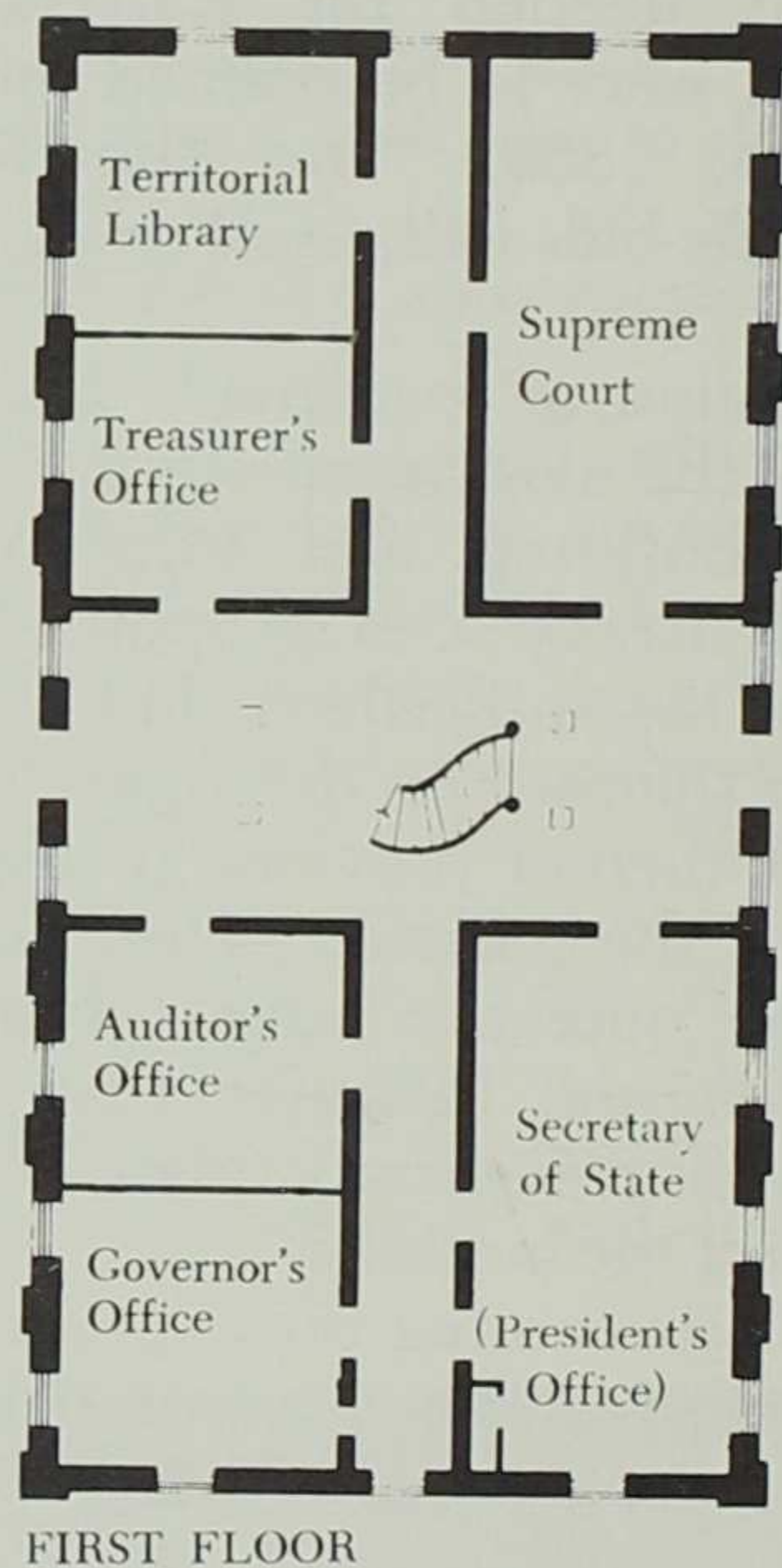
One of the legislators, Joseph C. Hawkins of Des Moines County, described Rague's proposal as "a beautiful plan—and if carried out it would be magnificent—but it would cost, according to the calculation of competent judges, \$250,000." Hawkins, Leffler, and other representatives from the southern part of the Territory were still bitter over the selection of Iowa City as the seat of government. They felt "the south" had been slighted. They even

introduced a bill in January 1840 to let the people vote on whether to move the capital to Mt. Pleasant. Their bill was defeated, but they succeeded in passing a bill to limit the building funds for the capitol.

This act required the commissioners to adopt a plan that would cost no more than \$51,000. The act called for strict compliance with its provisions and the rejection of more expensive plans adopted prior to its enactment. Furthermore, the commissioners were required to submit a full report to the special session of the Assembly scheduled for July. The report was to include the plan of the building and full details regarding the contracts entered into. Swan did submit a report, but since it was not published we cannot be sure if and how much Rague's plans were altered.

Work had hardly begun on the foundation of the capitol when on March 14, 1840, the contract with Rague was altered to eliminate construction of the porticos. Rague and Co., under terms of the new contract, would be paid \$34,000 plus an additional \$5,000 for furnishing stone for part of the building. Also party to the contract were William McDonald and William Skeen, who had worked on the Illinois capitol. Two days after the contract was signed, Skeen withdrew from the firm of Rague

The floor plans of the original building. The first floor was given over to offices for state officials and the Supreme Court chamber. After the building passed to The University of Iowa, the president's office occupied one corner of the first floor. The House and Senate Chambers were on the second floor. The House Chamber has been restored to its 1840s condition, but the Senate room remains as it was after the reconstruction of the 1920s. At the central core of the building is the famous reverse spiral staircase. (courtesy The University of Iowa)



and Co., but he continued as a foreman on the project under other contracts with the commissioners.

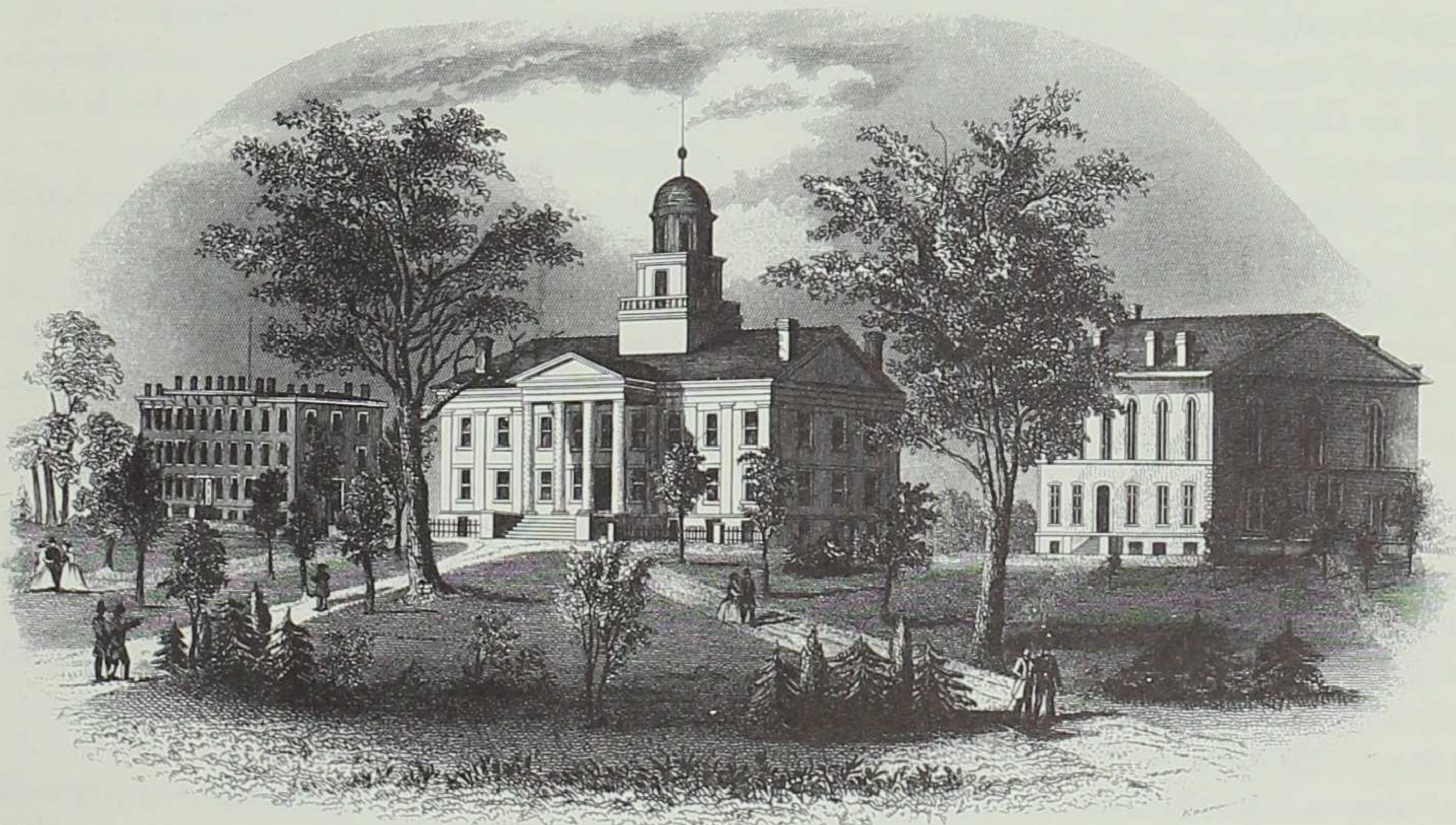
Rague, McDonald & Co. worked on the foundation until July, when they "threw up" the contract. They received \$10,000 for work already completed, but Swan discovered he had paid them too much and required them to return some \$1,100 in money and tools.

Rague may have withdrawn because of the reduction in funds by the legislature. But another reason was given publicly. The editor of the Burlington *Hawk-Eye* wrote in the July 23, 1830 issue: "We have been informed by Mr. Rague, Architect and Contractor of the Iowa Capitol, that on account of the failure of the Quarry, the Commissioners and himself have amicably cancelled the contract, and Mr. R. is employed by the Commissioners to make all the detail drawing as the work progresses. We understand the original

plan of the building will be preserved and is to be built of rubble masonry and stuccoed." This is one of the last contemporary references to Rague's connection with the building of the Stone Capitol.

On July 4, 1840, the foundation of the Capitol was only a few feet above the ground, but already the commissioners were plagued with shortages of building stone and financial worries. But this did little to dampen the spirits of Iowa Citizens. They were determined to properly celebrate Iowa City's second Fourth of July.

The crowd assembled at Theodore Sanxay's new house on Iowa Avenue. A workman placed the last brick on the structure—Iowa City's first brick house—and unfurled Old Glory as the crowd cheered. The bricks had been burned by Sylvanus Johnson who



This late-nineteenth century engraving shows the Old Capitol and surrounding University buildings.



The House Chamber, restored with a lobby, legislators' desks and chairs, and Sp

would also provide bricks for the interior walls of the Capitol. Johnson himself was there with his bass viol to add to the festivities along with a few other musicians. After a spirited rendition of the Star Spangled Banner, the crowd marched up Iowa Avenue to the Capitol site for the laying of the cornerstone.

Chauncey Swan lowered the copper box into the stone as a description of its contents was read to the crowd. The box contained copies of several United States and Territorial documents such as the Declaration of Independence and the Organic Law, as well as one copy of each of the Territorial newspapers. Also included was a scroll containing a description of the occasion and a list of important public officials—

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After an elegant feast, the table cloths were removed for the traditional Fourth of July toasts. Thirteen regular



Speaker's platform. The visitors' gallery projects overhead. (John Schultz photo)

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Governor Lucas returned to Burlington, and in his message to the special session of the Legislative Assembly he mentioned his trip to Iowa City: "I was gratified to see the extensive improvements that have been

made in that place within the last year. The basement story of the Capitol is nearly completed, and in justice to the acting Commissioner, as well as the gentlemen who performed the work, I must say that, so far as the work has progressed, it was done in the most substantial and workmanlike manner. . . ."

But with the failure of the City Quarry, the building progressed slowly, and alternatives to cut stone were being considered for building materials. However, a new quarry was located about 20 miles away on the Cedar River. Soon wagons filled with stone and drawn by six or eight oxen could be seen lumbering toward the Capitol site, their drivers cracking long whips and "making the air sing with expletives."

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The House Chamber, restored with a lobby, legislators' desks and chairs, and Speaker's platform. The visitors' gallery projects overhead. (John Schultz photo)

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A view of the House Chamber taken from the gallery. Most of the furnishings of the restored Chamber are reproduced from original Old Capitol examples. The curved desks and cane chairs for the 26 members of the House were arranged in a crowded semi-circle in front of the Speaker's platform. (John Schultz photo)

long way was time-consuming and expensive. The cost of getting the east doorsill in place alone was said to be \$120. Rumblings of discontent in the Legislative Assembly regarding the Acting Commissioner were growing louder.

Chauncey Swan pushed ahead with the construction, notwithstanding the criticism from the legislature. He was accustomed to the complaints, having endured them almost from the beginning of his tenure as commissioner. Swan's report to the Assembly in November 1840 showed the progress he was making. He listed expenditures for such materials and services as lumber; 3000 bushels of sand; powder, tools, and brimstone; ropes, shovels, and

buckets; joists, lintels, and putlocks; team work; expenses in quarry on the Cedar; hewing timber; blacksmithing; mason's lines and files; brick; three water barrels; 2240 feet of plank; 600 bushels of lime; hauling a safe from Bloomington; iron; timber for the roof; 1250 feet of pine plank; nails, and two-thirds of the rock needed to complete the building. Swan also reported that:

The inside walls of the building are erected to the second floor. The outside wall of the north end to the top of the second tier of windows. East front to the centre; the south end and west front, nearly to the bottom of the same. I have caused temporary roofs to be erected over all the walls, to secure them from frost and rain during the winter.

A month later, on December 9,

legislators' complaints came to a head when a committee was appointed under a joint resolution of the House and the Council "To repair to Iowa City, examine the public buildings, materials on hand, books, papers, and records of the Acting Commissioner, and collect all the information they may be able to procure, and report the same to the Legislative Assembly as soon as practicable."

The report, filed later that month, was critical of the way Swan was handling things, but there was little evidence that he was failing to carry out his responsibilities as best he could under the circumstances. A minority report partially vindicated Swan, but it too found fault with him for being "too indefinite" in his record keeping.

The upshot of the investigation was a revolutionary act passed by the As-

sembly and signed by the Governor on January 14, 1841. The act abolished the post of Acting Commissioner and created two new positions in its place: Territorial Agent to handle the financial matters, and Superintendent of Public Buildings to superintend the erection of the Capitol. Governor Lucas promptly appointed Chauncey Swan to the one-year Superintendent post.

Jesse Williams, the new Territorial Agent, immediately took steps to relieve the money shortage. He negotiated a loan (approved by the Legislative Assembly) of \$5,500 with the Miners' Bank of Dubuque. He reduced the price of lots in Iowa City to encourage sales. And he issued certificates of indebtedness, called "script" or "scrip," for work done on the building. With economic hard times engulfing the city, scrip soon became a common medium



The view of the House Chamber from the Speaker's platform, taken with a special 180° lens. (John Schultz photo)

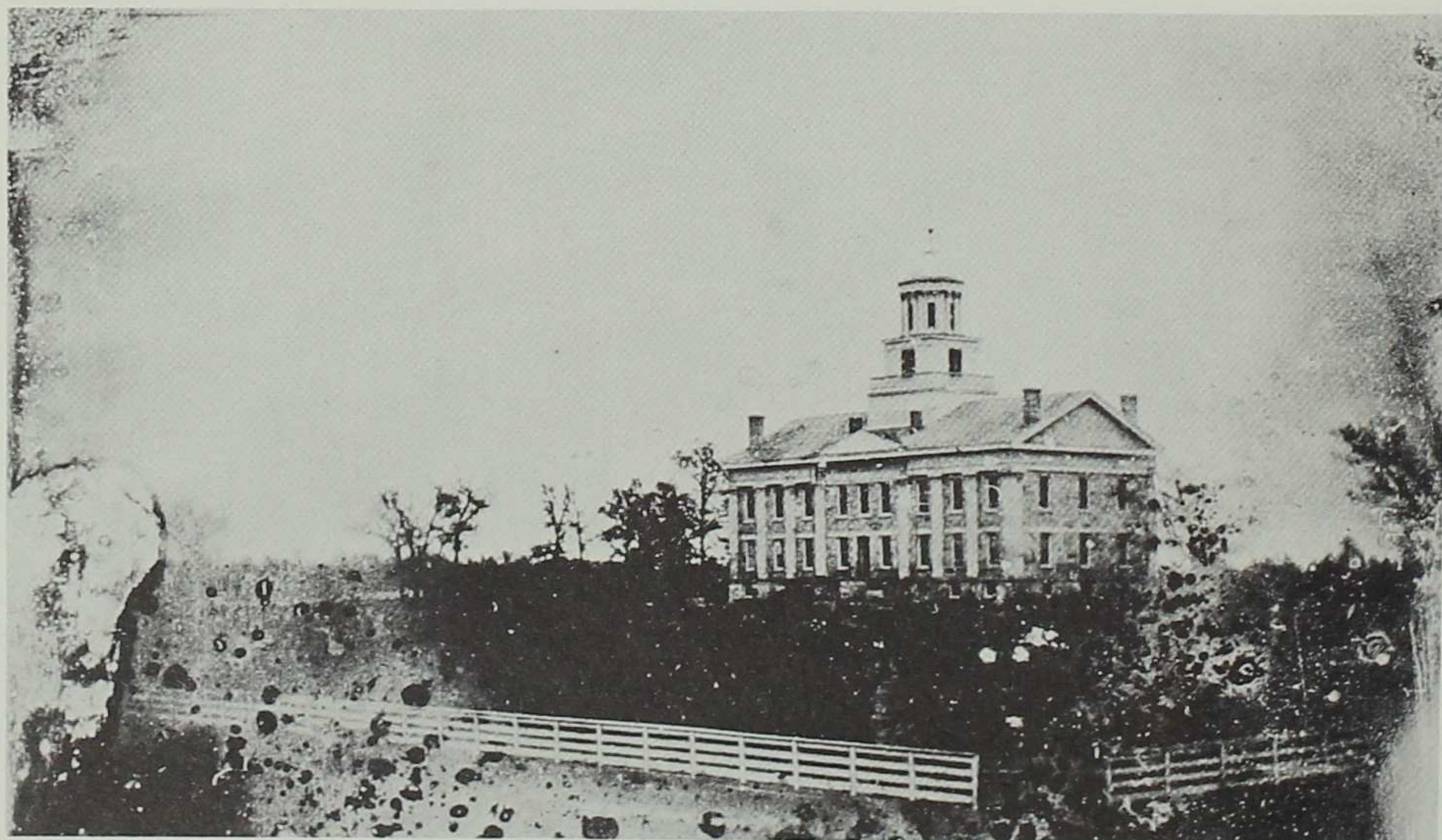
of exchange in the area. When the loan from the Miners' Bank came due in 1842, however, the Territory was unable to pay it, leading to the downfall of the Bank. Merchants began to refuse to accept the scrip that flooded the city. But construction of the building continued amid the financial difficulties.

In June 1841, the editor of the *Bloomington Herald* visited Iowa City and had this to say about the Statehouse:

The walls of the capitol are up to the top of the first story with the exception of one layer of stone on part of the west side, and the joists for the second story are partly laid on. The superintendent is actively and constantly engaged in the discharge of his duties and has prosecuted

ed operations with a dispatch beyond the expectations of any of the friends of the place. At present there are about 60 hands engaged on the building and about 20 in the quarry. Some cutters receive \$2.50 and laborers \$1.25 per day in scrip, for the redemption of which all unsold city lots are pledged. . . . The timbers for the roof are partly on the ground and in such a state of forwardness that it is supposed that in two weeks after the walls are up, the building can be put under cover, so it is thought quite probable that a sufficient number of rooms can be so far finished as to be used at the next session of the Legislature.

The Legislature would have to wait another year to convene in the Stone Capitol. In December 1841, Swan reported the east wall was finished all the



A faded and deteriorating photograph (probably a Daguerreotype) of Old Capitol, dated 1853. The placement of the chimneys in this photo aided restoration researchers in locating the fireplaces and stovepipe holes. (courtesy of the Wetherby Collection, Putnam Museum, Davenport, Iowa)



A graduating music class gathered on the steps of Old Capitol for this group portrait taken in the 1860s. (courtesy of the Wetherby Collection, Putnam Museum, Davenport, Iowa)

way to the cornice, while the west wall and ends of the building were five feet short of the cornice. The roof was more than half completed and "under a shed" to protect it from the weather. The window frames and sashes, the timbers and sheeting for the remainder of the roof, and the oak lumber necessary to "inclose the building and lay the floors" were all on hand.

About a month after filing this report, Chauncey Swan stepped down as official superintendent of construction of the Capitol, and William B. Snyder was appointed to take his place. Even after his withdrawal Chauncey Swan attempted to clear his name of charges of misconduct in office by filing affidavits with the legislative Council. A commit-

tee examined the affidavits and made the following resolution: "*Resolved*, That, in the opinion of this Council, the several charges heretofore preferred against Chauncey Swan of malconduct in, and abuse of the office of Superintendent of public buildings at Iowa City, are untrue." But partisan politics prevailed in the Council, and instead of approving the resolution the Council tabled it.

History has vindicated Chauncey Swan—for he is credited with building, if not designing, the Stone Capitol. A report by Swan's successor in January 1843 indicated that Swan did not need elaborate plans, by Rague or anyone else, to erect the Capitol.



(Robert A. Ryan photo)

Snyder reported, "I have not been able to make an accurate estimate for the cupalo, on account of there being no plan for the cupalo (nor for any thing else) in the Superintendent's office when I received it, and having enough to attend to through the season, I did not draw one." The "working plans for the building," for which John F. Rague was paid \$150 when he left the project in 1840, must have been very sketchy, for they were either lost or considered too insignificant to mention less than three years later. Swan and Skeen (Rague's former employee) had skillful-

ly carried on the construction of the handsome building, adapting its plan to the restrictions of the Assembly.

Nevertheless, the building seems to have ended up much as Rague had envisioned it. It turned out to be very close to the plan in the December 1840 committee report, adopted before major restrictions were placed upon the commissioners. The plan called for a building 120 feet long and 60 feet wide,

to be ornamented by magnificent porticos, one on each side, supported by four massive pillars, twelve feet in advance of the walls of the building.... The interior arrangement is as follows: the basement story is entered by two doors in the opposite ends, both opening into a hall seven feet wide, which runs directly through the building north and south, dividing it into two equal parts. There are four rooms on each side, about twenty feet square, designed for committee rooms. There is also a large and convenient wood-room, and a fireproof vault, arched with brick, and covered with grouted masonry more than three feet thick, for the safety of public documents. On the next floor there is the same division north and south, and a broad hall or vestibule east and west, entered from the porticos on each side of the building. North of the vestibule, east side, is a room forty-three by twenty-two and a half feet, designed for the supreme court; a corresponding room of the same size on the south of the vestibule, is designed for the use of the Secretary of the Territory. West of the north and south hall are four rooms, equal in size, designed for the use of the Governor, Auditor, Treasurer, and the Library. On the upper floor the north and south hall is omitted. In the south wing is the



The columns in the first floor central lobby frame the spiral staircase. (Robert A. Ryan photo)

Representatives hall, fifty-two by forty-three feet in the clear. In the north wing are the Council chamber and three small committee rooms, cut off from the west side of it.

The crowning touch was a spiral staircase in the center of the building, originally planned to extend from the basement to the cupola.

Some credit for the final, magnificent edifice must also go to William Snyder. Upon assuming duties of the office of Superintendent, he immediately located a new quarry about ten miles northeast of the city and prepared boats

for floating the stone down the Iowa River to the Capitol site. He finished the walls and roof, covering it with Allegheny pine shingles purchased in Cincinnati. Under his supervision, the Statehouse (though still unfinished) was ready for the Legislative Assembly in the fall of 1842.

A visitor to the new Territorial capital in 1843 remarked that "The State house is covered & two or three rooms finished; the east and west fronts are alike but the steps and pillars approaching the doors in the center are not built, the cornice not on nor the cupola or inside generally finished."

Construction continued over the next decade as money became available. The cupola gradually took shape; chimneys appeared; and steps and flagging were added to the east portico. But the Capitol was still "in a very unprotected condition, subject to be injured by storms" when Iowa became a state in 1846.

In 1848, the Assembly halls were nearly finished. And the following year money was appropriated to finish the cupola, basement, and first floor. In 1851, funds were appropriated for stairs in the building and for some work on the grounds, including the addition of a fence. Later, \$3,000 was appropriated "for repairing and modifying the building."

In 1857, state government followed the westward movement of settlement in Iowa. Des Moines became the capital, and the Stone Capitol became the central building of the University of

Iowa. It was used chiefly by the law college until 1910. In the 1920s, attempts were made to reconstruct the building, but in many ways Old Capitol may be considered incomplete until this Bicentennial year, when major restoration was completed and rooms were furnished to represent various periods from Territorial to University days.

The Old Stone Capitol was to witness many important events in the transformation of a sparsely populated Territory to a thriving Midwestern state. In the early days, it housed the last four Territorial Assemblies and the first six General Assemblies of the new state. It also witnessed three constitutional conventions (1844, 1846, and 1857), the birth of the Republican party in Iowa, and the death of the old Whig party.

The Old Stone Capitol became a natural gathering place. Her steps have held crowds assembled for mourning,

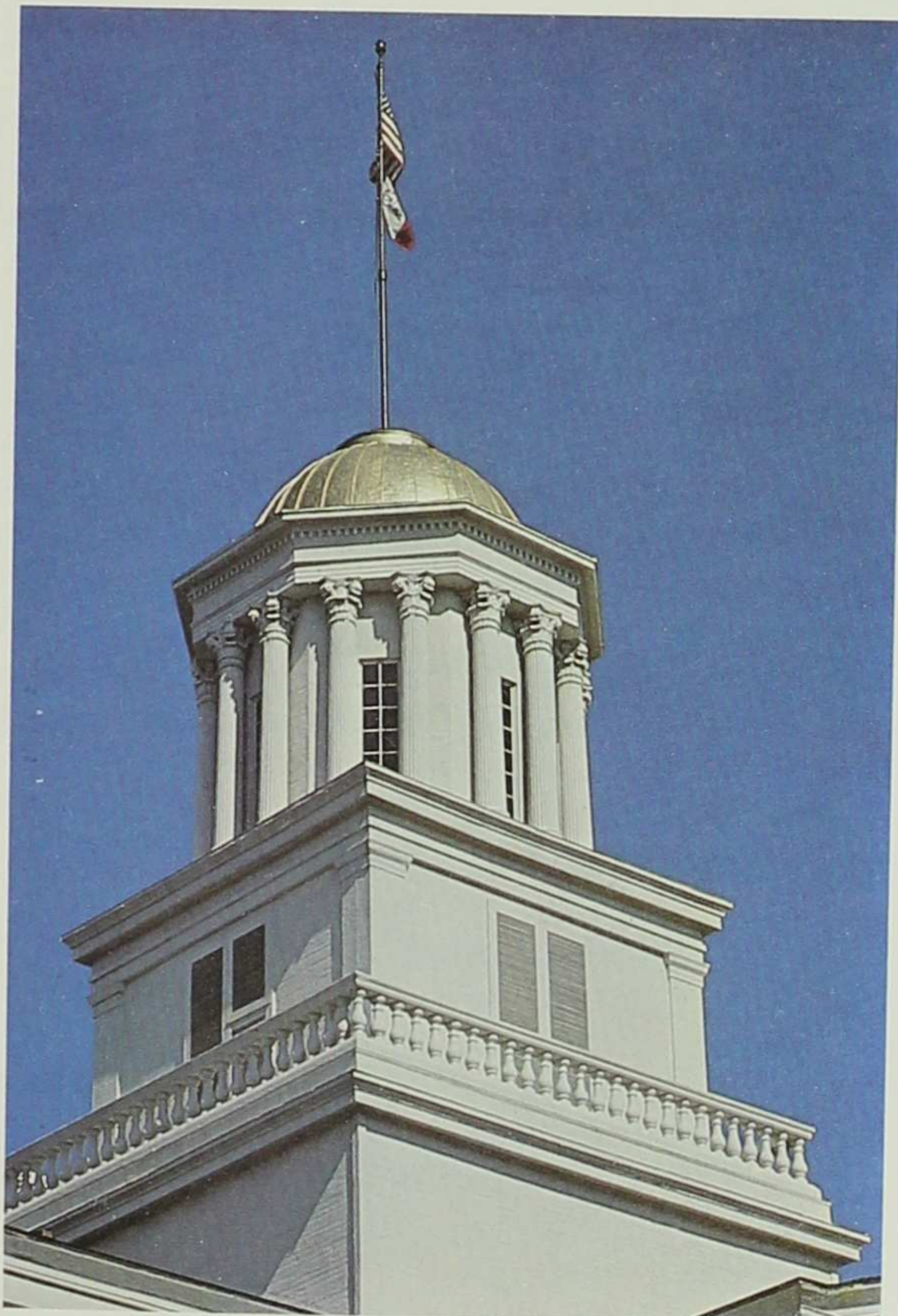
for patriotic celebration, and for social protest. In 1865, her brow was draped with black crepe to mourn the death of a great President. The year before, nearly 40 students had assembled on her steps to enroll as soldiers in a tragic war. A century later students would gather on the same steps to protest another war.

But what of tomorrow? Will the Old Stone Capitol be a spiritual as well as a physical reality for generations of Iowans to come? There is little doubt that the majestic building will continue in the role eloquently described by Benjamin Franklin Shambaugh in 1937:

The Old Stone Capitol will stand four-square to the world, facing east and facing west, with walls of stone and lighted dome, still faithfully performing its spiritual function of linking the memories of the past with the hopes and aspirations of the future. □

Note on Sources

The standard source on the history of Old Capitol is Benjamin F. Shambaugh, *The Old Stone Capitol Remembers* (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1939). Many other secondary and primary sources were also consulted for this article, including period newspapers, letters, and documents. The research files assembled under the direction of Margaret N. Keyes for the recent restoration of the building were open to the author, for which he is grateful. An annotated version of this article is available in the files of the Division of the State Historical Society, Iowa City.



(Robert A. Ryan photo)

OLD CAPITOL RESTORED

by Margaret N. Keyes

The task of restoring Old Capitol was a challenge—a challenge of research, of organization, and of building. Margaret Keyes, Professor of Home Economics and Director of Old Capitol at The University of Iowa headed the efforts to meet these challenges.

John Francis Rague's plan for Iowa's Old Capitol never was realized during the first years of construction. Financial problems, political squabbles, and the westward sweep of Iowa's population conspired to leave the Capitol unfinished by the time the seat of government was moved to Des Moines in 1857. Much of the original plan was left undone, most notably the west portico and an exterior decorative cornice.

The first attempt to complete the plan of the building came during the period from 1921 to 1923 when major reconstruction and fireproofing were approved for Old Capitol by the state legislature. The original drawings have never been located, but historical evidence is clear that a west portico was part of the plan. A photograph taken before 1901 shows several signs of the intended portico: a recessed area in the exterior cornice in the center of the west facade; the triangular pediment on the roof; and the platform which formed the base for the intended columns all indicate the portico was planned, but never built. During the 1920's reconstruction, pillars were added to complete the west portico.

This addition is the only major change to the outward appearance of Old Capitol since its original construction.

The interior of the building, however, was altered many times during the 113 years it served the daily needs of The University of Iowa. The building provided classrooms, offices, and space for chapel services and meetings of nineteenth century literary societies. To accommodate these changing needs, frequent alterations were made to interior walls—sometimes moving them to expand an area, at other times adding walls to create more interior rooms. The State Board of Education specified in 1923 that the reconstruction should assure historical authenticity and integrity. The Board said: "That in the reconstruction of said building, the exterior shall not be changed in its appearance, structure or design and only such change shall be made in the interior of said building as is necessary to properly carry out the purpose and intent of this act to make said building fireproof or substantially so and to reproduce said structure without change in any of its original parts."

The last classes held in Old Capitol, those of the College of Law, were moved to Gilmore Hall in 1910. Afterward, the building served exclusively as offices for the University administration. In the 1960s, the rapidly expanding University outgrew the modest 120 x 60 foot building, and its

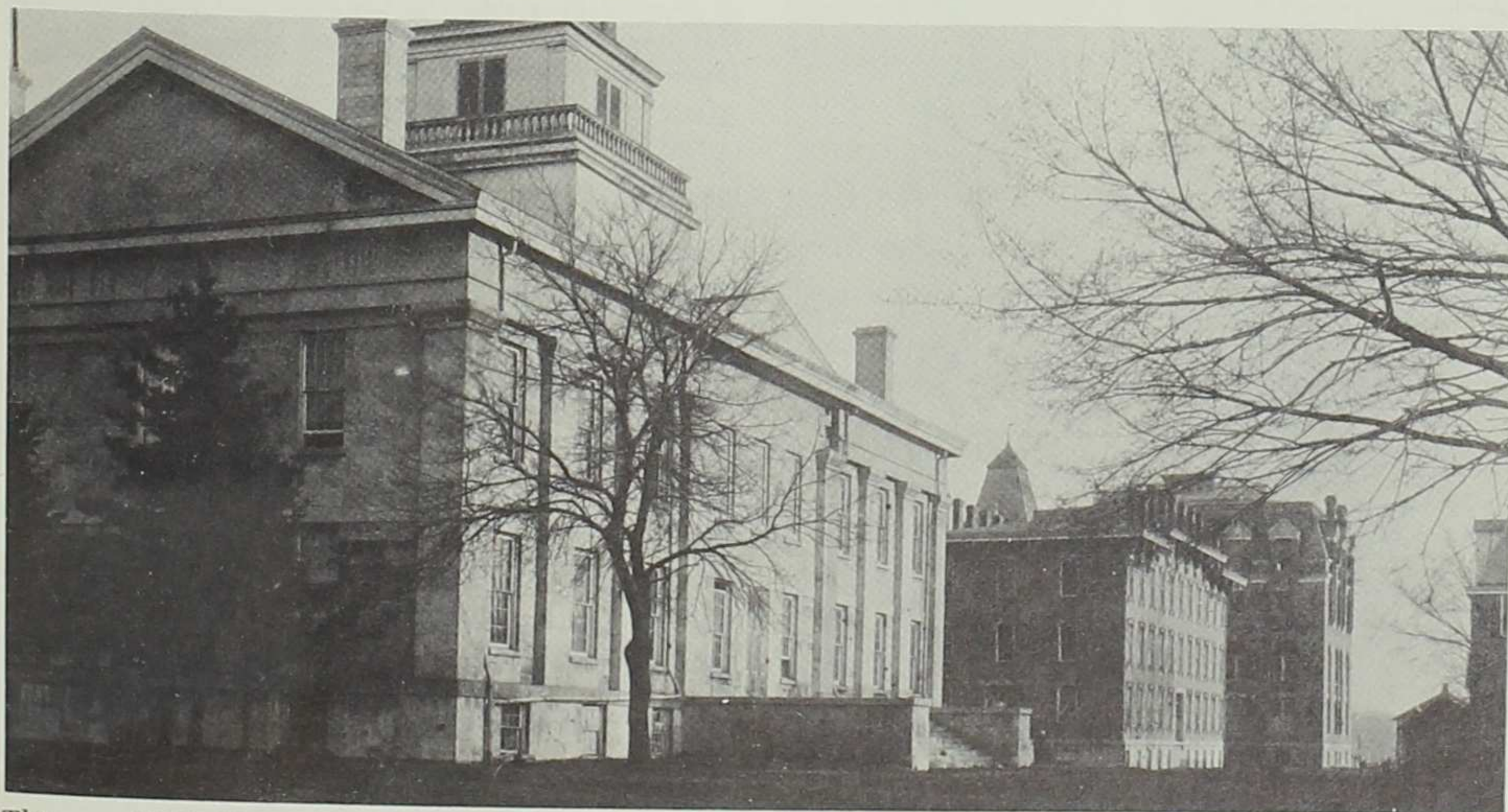
space proved inadequate to house the administration.

In 1970, Willard L. Boyd, President of the University of Iowa, announced that the Old Capitol would be restored. Administrative offices were removed to other quarters, and research began. Boyd appointed an advisory committee with Mrs. Virgil M. Hancher, Iowa City (wife of former University President Hancher) as chairman, Frank T. Nye, Cedar Rapids, as vice-chairman, and Margaret N. Keyes, Iowa City, as director of research. Students, faculty, staff, friends, and alumni of the University joined them on the 45-member committee. E. W. Henderson, Jr., of Ferry and Henderson Architects, Inc. of Springfield, Illinois, served as consulting architect to the restoration project.

The task of restoring Old Capitol began with study. The research staff combed through primary sources

—sources that could give firsthand accounts of the building's planning and construction—in order to compile as much information as possible about the building. It was necessary to know many details about the planning and construction of Old Capitol before major decisions could be made as to how the restoration should take shape. The Journals of the House and Council of the Territory of Iowa, the Journals of the State of Iowa, the Laws of Iowa, the Iowa Code of 1851, original vouchers for the expenditures of federal funds granted to the Territory (located at the National Archives in Washington, D.C.), newspapers, books, memoirs of people associated with early government or the construction of Old Capitol, and other sources were searched thoroughly.

Unfortunately, the original plans for the building could not be found. The House Journal of 1840 contained a com-



This pre-1901 photo shows clearly the recesses just below the roof and the platform intended for a west portico. The original plan evidently called for a portico, but it was not completed. The west portico was added during the 1920s. (courtesy of The University of Iowa)

mittee report that described the building's floor plan, but there was no indication of what was actually built or whether the plans should be read from left to right. Lacking documentary evidence, the researchers looked to the physical evidence of the building. When the plaster was stripped from the interior walls, many new architectural clues were revealed. The location of previous walls, for example, appeared as bricked-up recesses. Several questions were answered by a careful study of the bared walls.

One of the mysteries was the question of whether or not a gallery had been built in the House Chamber. Benjamin Shambaugh in *The Old Stone Capitol Remembers* (Iowa City, 1939) said a gallery was planned, but never built because of lack of money. Yet, the researchers found frequent references to a gallery in journals and newspapers of the 1850s. The walls provided the answer. Under the plaster were the telltale signs of supports—the gallery had been built.

Surprisingly, fireplaces were found in the four corner offices on the first floor. Apparently, these were the first sources of heat in these rooms, although the fireplaces were later bricked over and cast-iron stoves installed. There was no evidence of fireplaces on the second floor, but stovepipe holes clearly indicated the method of heating in use there.

Through the careful study of documents, physical evidence, and historical photos (showing, for example, the style of window shutters) the research team was able to prepare an accurate and authentic picture of the building. Working with the architects, plans were



The walls of the Supreme Court Chamber, stripped of plaster, revealed the bricked-over fireplace and stovepipe holes. (courtesy of The University of Iowa, Don Roberts photo)

drawn, and restoration construction began.

Research into the physical appearance of the building itself progressed well during the first years of work, but despite intensive efforts, none of Old Capitol's original furniture could be found. The disappearance of most of the furniture apparently stemmed from the removal of the building's contents in 1857 when the seat of government moved to Des Moines. All of the furnishings in Old Capitol were loaded onto bobsleds and oxcarts for the winter journey to the new capital. When the teams mired down in mud and snow, most of the furniture was dis-

carded and left to rot. There was no way of finding out how much—if any—of Old Capitol's furniture reached Des Moines.

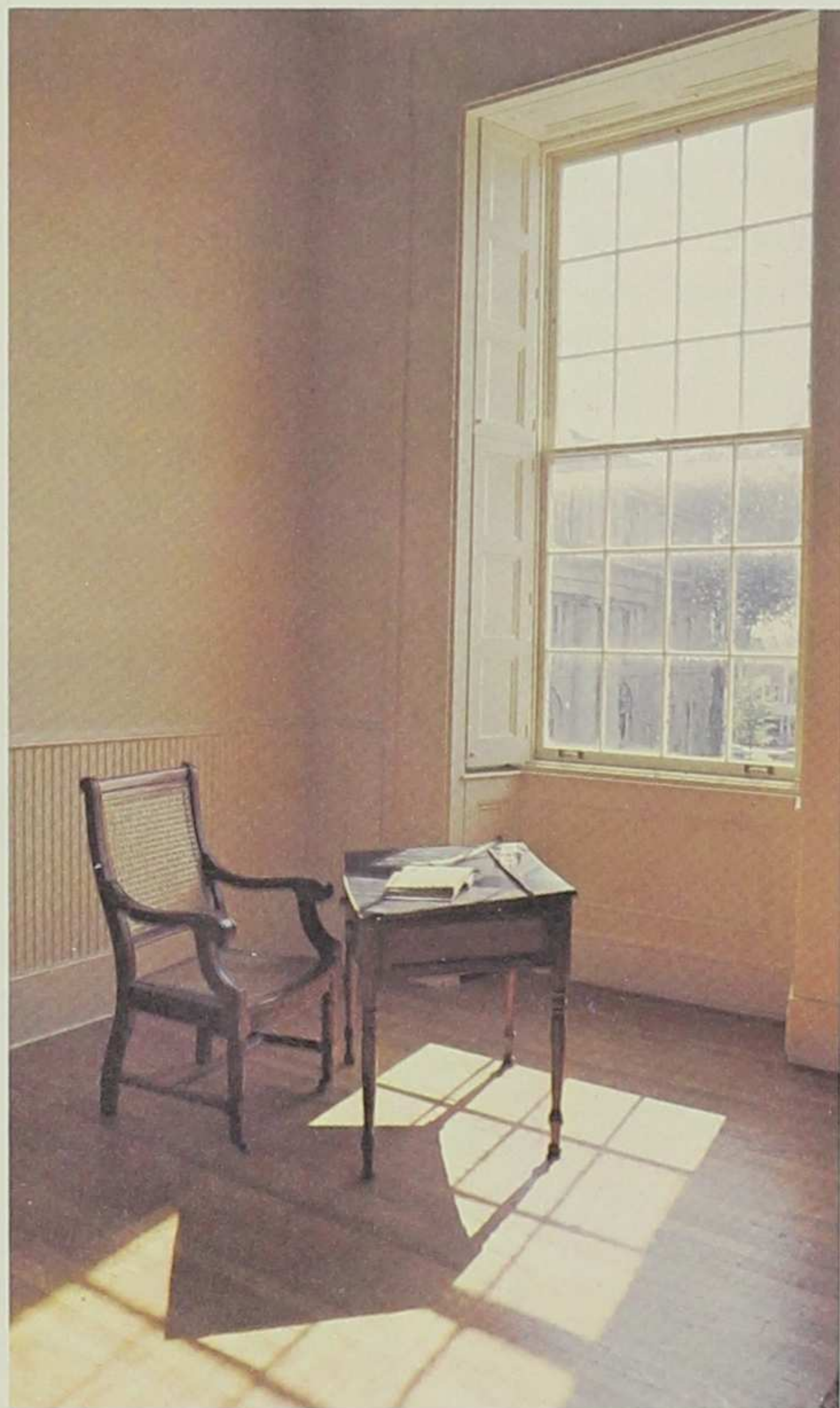
The lack of surviving examples left only two avenues: to find appropriate furniture of the 1840-1850 period for use in the restored building and to reproduce copies of furniture patterned after actual pieces used in other, similar state capitols of the time. These plans were put in motion, and on July 29, 1974 came the first break in locating the original furniture. Wendell W. Davis, a workman on the restoration project, saw an advertisement for an auction sale in What Cheer, Iowa: "... walnut chair (from Old State Capitol in Iowa City)." The chair was examined, purchased, and, indeed, appears to be one of the original chairs from the House Chamber. Records in the National Archives showed 26 cane chairs were purchased for the House Chamber in 1839. The chair from the What Cheer auction had the original cane holes under upholstery that had been added later. It also had an imprint, "State of Iowa Custodians," stamped into the underside of the frame. The newly-purchased chair served as a model for 26 cane chairs reproduced by the Norman Schanz Furniture Company of West Amana, Iowa.

Researchers ran into the same difficulty when they searched for originals of the desks for the House Chamber. They could find none and were forced to develop a design based on desks used in the capitols of Illinois and North Carolina. A contract for manufacturing the desk reproductions was about to be awarded when a letter came from Dr. Paul R. Beall, Winter Park, Florida.

Beall told the story of "the nice little desk from Old Capitol" which had been given to his grandfather, a former superintendent of grounds and buildings at the capitol in Des Moines. Photographs showed a desk strikingly similar to the researched design. Today, 26 reproductions based on the Beall desk, also made by Schanz, are in the restored Housed Chamber of Old Capitol.



Workmen install steel support beams for the gallery in the House Chamber in November 1974. (courtesy of The University of Iowa, Don Roberts photo)



Desk and chair from the House Chamber. (John Schultz photo)

Similar problems arose over the carpet. Original vouchers showed the purchase of yards and yards of carpeting for the building, but gave no description to the type of a carpet, the pattern, or the colors. There were, however, many descriptions in secondary sources of the designs and colors of carpet available in the 1840s and 1850s. A commonly-used carpeting of Brussels construction was considered appropriate for the building. By pure chance, the writer met Peter and Mary Louise Grinnell of Fairhaven, Massachusetts who owned a piece of mid-nineteenth cen-

Note on Sources

This article is based on research in several kinds of documents and publications. Government sources include the *Journals* of the Iowa Territorial House and Council and the *Journals* of the Iowa State House and Senate between 1839 and 1857. Also helpful were the *Laws of Iowa*, Chapter 157 and *Legislative and Contingent Expenses of the Territory of Iowa*, Account No. 81,345, 1839 (National Archives, Washington, D.C.). Newspaper accounts used include the *Iowa City Daily Republican*, June 27, 1856 and the *Iowa Capitol Reporter*, December 13, 1854. More recent sources consulted were the *Report of the Special Committee of the State Board of Education*, July 3, 1923 and "UI's Old Capitol to be Preserved as Historic Site," in the *Iowa City Press-Citizen*, July 18, 1970. An annotated version of this article is available in the files of the Division of the State Historical Society, Iowa City.

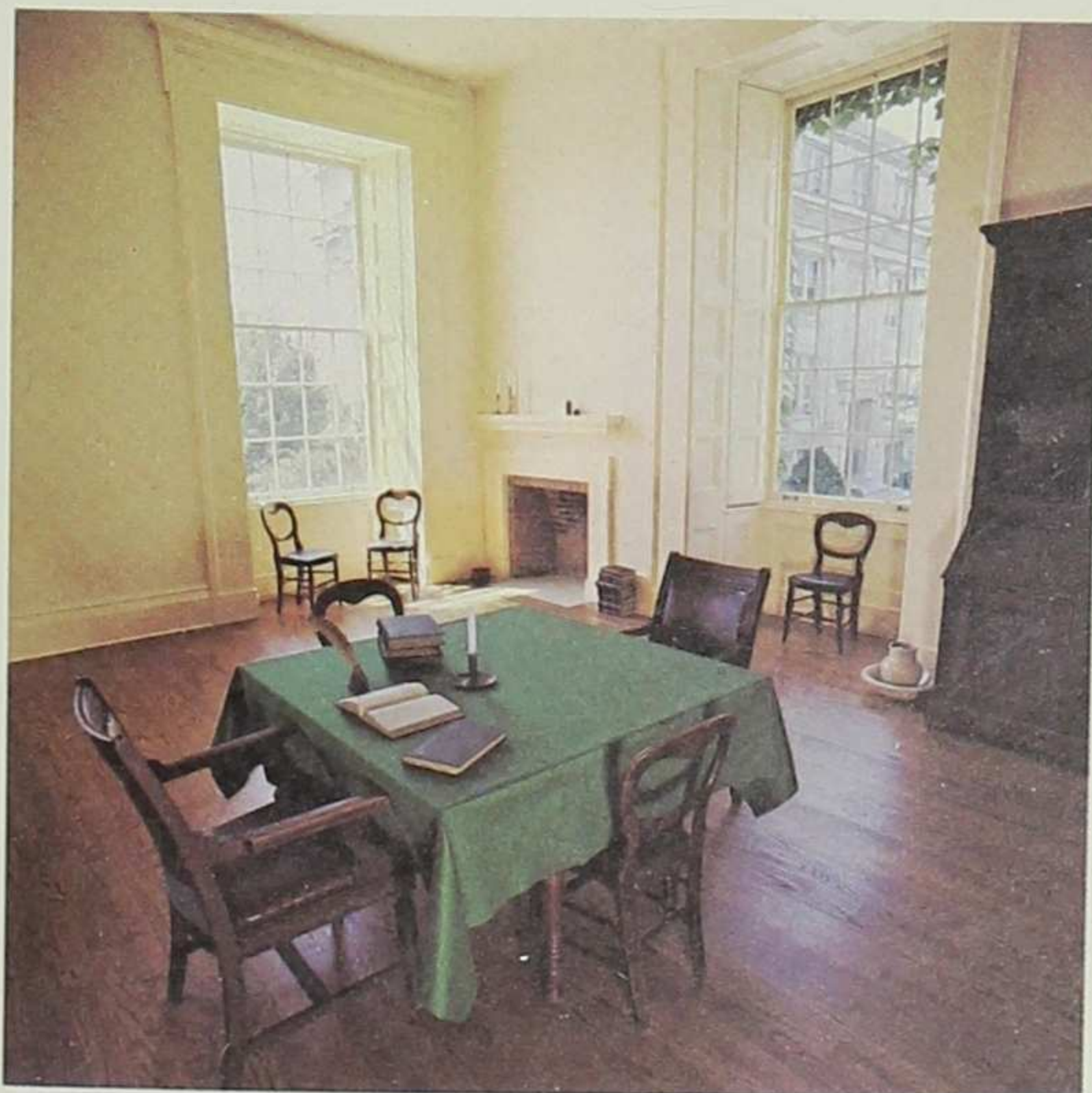
Readers interested in further reading may wish to consult two articles by Margaret N. Keyes: "The Gallery Will be Reserved for Ladies," *Annals of Iowa*, (third ser.) 42 (Summer 1973), 1-16 and "Piecing Together Iowa's Old Capitol," *Historic Preservation*, 26 (January-March 1974), 41-43. Benjamin Shambaugh's *The Old Stone Capitol Remembers* (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1939) is also a helpful introduction to the history of the building.

tury Brussels carpeting which they offered to loan to the project as a pattern. Both the Greek Revival borders and motifs and the color of the carpet sample seemed right for Old Capitol. The House Chamber is now carpeted with a reproduction of the Brussels carpet, made especially for the building by a Durham, England carpet mill.

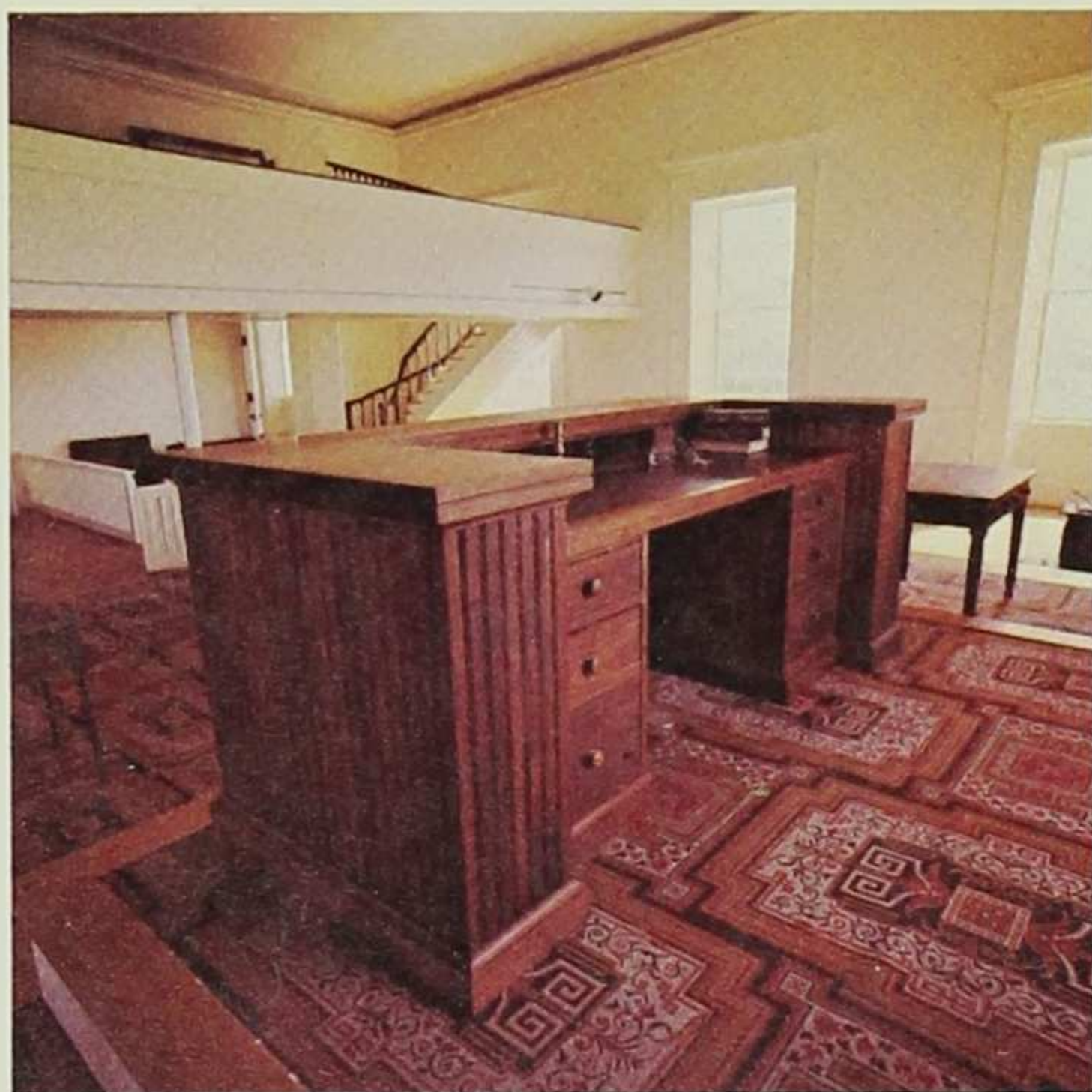
Information about other contents of Old Capitol was sought, and in some cases, found. Over 1000 books from the original library were located by research librarian Martha Esbin. The search for the actual volumes began after finding the two earliest library catalogues. If books were listed in the first catalogues and had dates before 1857, these were good clues, but a reference in the *Laws of Iowa* gave the clinching evidence. Each book in the Old Capitol library was to have the words "Iowa State Library" written at the bottom of page 30. Most of the



The restored Governor's Office on the first floor of Old Capitol. (John Schultz photo)



The Library. (John Schultz photo)



The specially-woven Brussels carpet in the restored House Chamber and a reproduction of the Speaker's desk. (John Schultz photo)



A legislator's traveling desk. (John Schultz photo)

original volumes turned up in the state libraries in Des Moines, the Division of the State Historical Society in Iowa City, or The University of Iowa Libraries. These agencies returned the books to Old Capitol, and private donors have also given original books.

These examples illustrate the satisfactions and frustrations that the researchers on the Old Capitol project experienced in the six years of study and planning for the dedication and opening of the building on July 3, 1976. We continue to locate more information on the building's structure and its contents, and the Old Capitol staff is optimistic that some of the remaining questions will be answered in the future. For example, no one knows what color the walls were painted. The original vouchers simply list the purchase of paint, without reference to color. It was impossible to analyze the nineteenth century paint layers because all of the original plaster was removed from the walls during the reconstruction of the 1920s. Perhaps some yet undiscovered source will one day answer this question. Old letters, diaries, newspapers, or any related documents of the mid-nineteenth century are sought eagerly in an effort to gain additional knowledge of Old Capitol and to strengthen what is already known about this unique part of Iowa's heritage. □



(Robert A. Ryan photo)

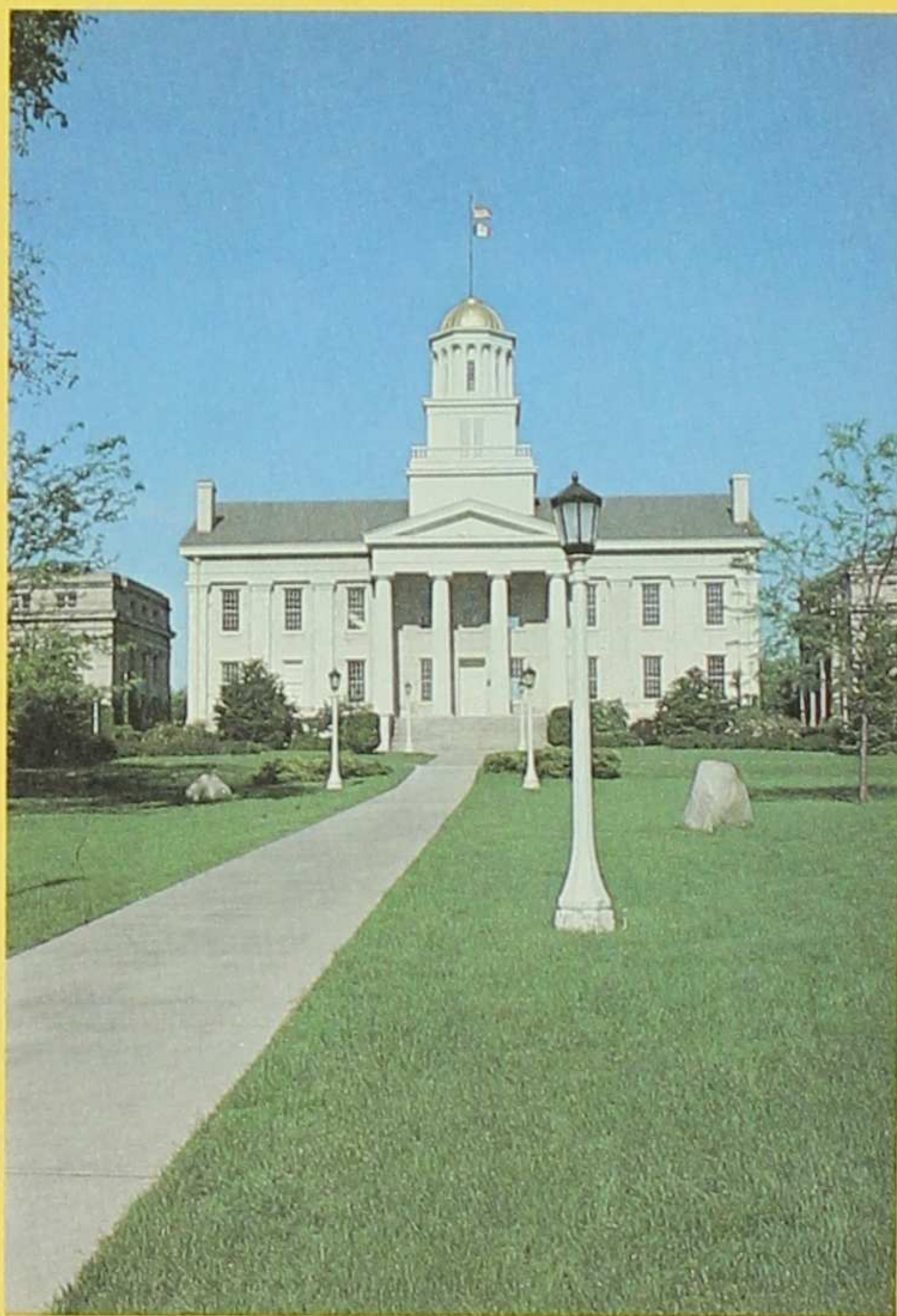
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Special photography for this issue provided by Robert A. Ryan, Iowa City, and John Schultz, Indianola.

The Division of the State Historical Society and the editor are not responsible for statements of fact or opinion made by contributors.



(Robert A. Ryan photo)



The State Historical Society of Iowa is a Division of the Iowa State Historical Department, a state agency created by the Sixty-fifth General Assembly. Along with the Society the Department includes a Division of Historical Museum and Archives (formerly Iowa Department of History and Archives) and a Division of Historic Preservation.